**New Dawn**

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# New Dawn

by yesmilady (AMHC)

Summary

Carl dies and goes to heaven. His life is never the same after that.

Notes

Hi! This is yours truly with a 2024 update for new readers. I started this series in 2017 as a distraction from personal tragedy. I didn't really know what I was doing with it for a while, but eventually, I fell in love with this strange little universe. I hope you will too!

Please mind the "Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings" tag. Also, please forgive any early installment weirdness! I promise it gets better. At some point I will go back and improve on the early chapters, but I SWEAR it does get better.

Here's what you need to know:

- The Walking Dead canon diverges from Season 6, Episode 14, where Rick makes the deal with the Hilltop community but hasn't encountered Negan yet. Carl's eye trauma is still fresh but he's well on his way to recovery, and Rick and Michonne had just recently gotten together.
- Supernatural canon diverges from Season 8, Episode 1. There's a bit of backstory I haven't gotten around to writing yet, but what you need to know is that Dean and Cas escaped Purgatory a few months earlier than in canon, and in their absence, the zombie apocalypse happened. I'll get around to writing that prequel at some point (and much of it is already written). The point is that Dean and Cas have been together for a while, and also the dead have been up and walking for years.

# It's a New Day

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rick Grimes woke up to the sound of birds.

He remembered waking up to worse sounds. Like walker moans, or his old phone's alarm tone, when he spent the night on the couch because he had a fight with Lori, and was too wound up to go to sleep at a decent hour even though he had work in the morning, watching infomercials instead.

Or like walker moans.

The birds were kind of loud, though. Michonne obviously felt that way, from the way she grumbled in her sleep, burrowing her head against his back.

Animals, in general, hadn't fared well in the new world. He'd encountered his share of them over time, but it was obvious their numbers dwindled, domestic animals and wildlife alike. Cats and dogs had either gone feral, were eaten when their people got too hungry or survived in closely guarded communities like Alexandria.

Wildlife too was scarce - as he and his family learned while living on the road, there was simply not enough fresh meat to go around, no matter how hard Daryl applied himself. It was a shame, Rick thought. No matter how strong, fast or agile the animal was, the damn walkers got into everywhere, through either strength or sheer numbers.

But, it wasn't just the shambling, roaming dead that were a threat to the wildlife. Animals didn't turn if they got bit (though they got sick and died just like humans). They died if *they* themselves bit into the dead. Rick had heard of it from other survivors, but he'd seen it for himself in Alexandria not too long ago.

His neighbors, a sweet old couple, used to have a Doberman by the name of Charlie - a friendly, docile old thing that was lucky enough to arrive in Alexandria with his owners at the very beginning. After the walker herd attack ended, Charlie helped himself to a fresh enough walker cadaver before any of the cleanup teams got to it. The poor dog took ill and died in a matter of hours.

Birds didn't get sick, however. Rick had seen crows pick at walker guts for hours without so much as a wobble, nothing at all indicating them becoming sick.

Back at the prison, watching the crows play with the dead was what passed as quality entertainment. The large black birds would often toy with the walkers that surrounded the prison fences, luring one or two away in what Rick considered exemplary teamwork. They swooped in when the walker stumbled and left itself open for a picking attack, or just left juicy bits of its guts on the ground.

It was morbidly fascinating. It also was the reason Rick and his family avoided birds in their menu as much as they could help it, even if the birds were making it easy for them by literally nesting on top of Rick's roof.

Right now they couldn't be bothered to test the birds' dubious meat. The Hilltop community came through and through, supplying them with enough fresh vegetables, fruits, even eggs, to overflow their stockpiles. Their current concern was how to preserve anything they couldn't consume immediately, so it wouldn't rot and go to waste.

If nothing else, seeing his people fed and taken care of strengthened Rick's resolve, knowing that they've made the right call by taking care of the Saviors. The world didn't need any more people who preyed on others, and if taking care of them meant Rick could feed his children, well, two birds, one stone, right?

"I'm thinking omelets for breakfast," Rick said, rolling to face the stirring Michonne. His fingers drew patterns on her naked shoulder. "With tomatoes," he kissed her forehead, "and sweet peppers," he kissed the tip of her nose, "the leftover beans from dinner…"

Michonne gave a little groan of pleasure. "Sweet talker."

They took advantage of the still silent baby monitor. After a shower, Rick was busy making true on his promises, humming to himself while the eggs cooked. Michonne was still upstairs getting ready.

When she had to, Michonne could slum it up with the best of them. She would never complain about the gore, the dirt or the smells following unwashed human bodies. Sometimes, simply surviving - staying alive despite all other odds - that was enough, and asking for more than that had seemed downright ungrateful.

But when she didn't have to, when they had *hot water* and toiletries and the time to spend on them - Michonne made sure she enjoyed them. Thoroughly and at length.

Things like soap and toothpaste were finite, though. Like food today, sooner or later scavenging wouldn't be enough. Hell, even the food they bargained out of the Hilltop community wouldn't last forever. Rick and the people of Alexandria needed to start figuring out how to produce things on their own. The knowledge had to be out there somewhere - Rick made a mental note to start visiting libraries and bookstores on their next supply runs.

Michonne drew him out of his musings when she came into the kitchen. As always, he was immediately charmed by the way she looked in her bathrobe and toweled hair. "Where's Judith?" She asked. "And Carl?"

"Still sleeping, I think." Rick said. True, Judith keeping silent so late was unusual, but Rick wasn't in any rush to wake a sleeping toddler. He gestured at the baby monitor. "Wasn't this thing working fine last night?"

Lately, Judith was the one who woke them in the morning. Not by crying, but by babbling to herself in the way toddlers liked to do. If Rick didn't think she was too young for it, he would

have thought she had an imaginary friend. Sometimes it looked like she was having an actual conversation with someone.

“Judith isn’t in her crib,” Michonne said with a frown. “I knocked on Carl’s door, he’s not home either.”

“Where would Carl take Judy at this time of the day?” He turned off the stove, then stalked to the staircase. From there he could also see Carl’s shoes where he kicked them off by the front door yesterday. He called out, “Carl? Carl?”

Receiving no answer but a “told you so”, from Michonne. He went outside to check to ask his neighbors. Joe used to be a tax attorney before he retired with his wife Anna to Florida. They had been visiting relatives in Washington DC when the dead started walking and stumbled on Alexandria by mistake. Joe routinely woke up at the break of dawn to walk his dog, then sit on his porch for hours in what he called “a time for reflection.” He kept at the habit even after the dog passed away.

Rick found him on the porch as expected. “Hey Joe, have you seen Carl and Judith this morning?”

“Morning Rick,” said Joe. “Haven’t seen them, sorry.”

Rick raised his hand in thanks. He was getting irritated. Carl was a fantastic older brother. He cared for Judith deeply and he never complained about watching her, or changing her, or when she was acting fussy. He also knew that Rick wanted to know where she was, who was taking care of her. It was very out of character for him not to do so. Rick exchanged an uneasy look with Michonne.

“Maybe he took her to Denise?” He wondered out loud. Was Judy feeling sick, with Carl taking her to the clinic to be looked at? Still without telling either Michonne or Rick?

By noon, the entire community was searching, and Rick’s irritation turned into outright fear. His kids weren’t at the clinic, or at the storeroom, or the armory, or the church, or at any of the houses. No one had seen hair nor hide of Carl or Judith since yesterday. It wasn’t long before they realized Enid and Mikey, the two other teenagers living in Alexandria, were also missing.

Maybe the kids went on a joyride outside the walls. Rick would have been furious, sure, but he also knew that Carl could take care of himself. Enid too for that matter, although he wasn’t too sure about Mikey. Teenagers messing around was - not expected, he expected better of his boy - but not entirely unheard of. Teenagers acting dumb was a reason to be angry, a reason to be fearful, yes, but there would have been an explanation at least.

But *Judith*? Why take Judith?

By nightfall, Rick’s (and Michonne’s, and Maggie’s, and Glenn’s and Mikey’s dad Kent’s) fear grew into abject terror.

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Carl woke up to a vague feeling that something was missing.

Eyes blinking open, he found himself staring at an unfamiliar ceiling. There were little star pasties stuck to it, somehow still glowing despite the sun rays that filtered through the window.

The room was large and in shades of blues and grays. It was cluttered, but not in an altogether messy way. There was a huge television directly in front of Carl's bed. A blue shining light at the bottom corner told Carl that wherever this was, they seemed to have electricity. The TV was hooked to a gaming system, with stacks of video games arranged in neat little piles.

The bedroom walls were decorated with a dart board as well as with posters of bands and celebrities Carl couldn't name if he tried. There were shelves with sports trophies, and a bookcase overflowing with hardcovers and comic books. Face warming, Carl also noticed a box of kleenex tissues and a bottle of lotion on the nightstand.

He reached under the pillow, not surprised to find an empty space instead of a knife. He spied a baseball bat that was perched on one of the shelves, next to a baseball glove, ball, and a trophy shaped like a giant golden cup. He went to pick it up, but the inscription on the trophy base gave him pause:

*Carl Grimes*
*Player of the Year Award*

Feeling more than a bit unsettled, Carl collected the baseball bat, feeling its weight and balance in his hands. He gave it a test swing and then, satisfied, tiptoed towards the door.

There was no one in the hallway beyond his bedroom. Carl was silent as he made his way down the hall, aided by the carpeting beneath his bare feet. The rest of the doors were closed. He stopped and pressed an ear to each one, advancing only when he was sure there was no movement behind the door.

The hallway walls were not bare either. There were a few hung framed photographs of smiling babies. They looked a bit generic, almost like those stock photos that came with picture frames. A large mirror hung at the end of the hallway.

As he moved closer to the flight of stairs at the end of the hallway, he realized he could hear someone moving around below, likely at the kitchen from the sound of clinking glasses and cabinets being opened and closed. And then there was a frankly wonderful smell of something sweet cooking…

He dropped the baseball bat. It hit the carpet with a dull thud. Carl stared at his reflection in the mirror. He pushed his messy hair back, stepping close enough that his breath fogged the glass. Suddenly he knew exactly what he woke up missing.

Carl had known physical pain before, but nothing like the ache in his eye and in his head for the past few weeks. It had dulled some, true, and the pain medication was helping, but it was always there. Carl had felt it ever since the horde attack at Alexandria, when he woke up to his father clutching his left hand, and he'd had to turn his face to see him, because Carl's right eye was just *gone*.

That pain was missing now. He didn't need it when he was staring at his two - *two, he had both of them* - eyes.

He didn't know how long he stood there staring at his reflection. He would have thought nothing could draw his attention away from the fact his eye had somehow grown back, but he was wrong.

"Carl, honey, are you up yet?" A voice suddenly called out to him.

"...Mom?" he whispered.

"Who else, silly?" Lori said. "Hurry up now, I've made waffles."

Tears falling freely, Carl abandoned his baseball bat to the hallway and made his way down the stairs.

*This is a dream*. He thought. *Or I'm dead*. But before he could lay eyes on his *dead mother*, Carl watched her leave through the front door.

"I'm just heading to the store," she called over her shoulder, "Look after Judith and be sure to eat some fruit with your breakfast."

"Mom, wait," Carl said, rushing after her. "Mom!"

Somehow, in the two seconds it took for Carl to make it to the house's front door, Lori had already buckled herself inside a shiny silver car and was pulling away from the curve.

In his PJs and bare feet, Carl gave chase.

Chapter End Notes

The idea of zombie flesh being poisonous to scavenger animals is taken from World War Z by Max Brooks.

# The Kids Aren't Alright

Claire's radio spewed a bunch of static. She had her fingers on the dial, turning it right, left, right and right again.

It was another pleasant morning. She sat on a stool by the kitchen island, nursing a tall glass of freshly squeezed orange juice. Her parents busied themselves around her: her mother was squeezing more oranges, stopping every so often to empty the little plastic citrus juicer into a juice jar, and her father was frying bacon strips, quietly singing as he worked:

*"In a cavern, In a canyon,*
*excavating for a mine,*
*dwelt a miner forty-niner,*
*and his daughter Clementine."*

Claire longed to turn around and look at them, but she settled for watching them in her peripheral vision. She fiddled with her radio.

The little portable device was their gift to her. Or at least, she assumed it was. She had asked for it, blinked, and there it was. She was very pleased about it, too. She was beginning to get tired of playing with the television static. You couldn't walk around with a TV in your pockets for starters, and mobility was kind of a big deal.

She didn't always get the things she asked for. She figured there were some limitations, but she was still trying to scope them out. Clothes she'd almost always get when she asked for them, even though she had to be very specific about it. Otherwise, she would have ended up with the entire Summer collection from The Gap. Weapons were out of the question, of course, but for some reason so was a hair dryer.

*"Oh my darling, oh my darling,*
*oh my darling Clementine."*

Once, she had asked for a car, and a moment later she found keys in her pocket and a cherry red Corvette parked outside. Then she asked for a Harley-Davidson, and when she didn't get anything, she specified that she wanted a motorcycle. When she still didn't get anything, she went on a twenty-minute long tirade describing exactly the type of bike she wanted. The next morning she found a *bicycle* in her bedroom, complete with a helmet, knee and elbow pads, as well as a yellow reflective headband.

She asked for a horse next. It was currently hanging out in the backyard. She called it Buttercup.

*"You are lost and gone forever,*
*dreadful sorry, Clementine."*

Claire felt a lump rise in her throat. She blinked rapidly to clear the mist in her eyes, feeling stupid.

“Will you just shut up?” she snapped and immediately Jimmy fell silent.

It was another pleasant morning. Through the kitchen window, Claire could see the too blue sky, the dazzling green of suburban lawns, the perfect white of picket fences, the gleaming red of the convertible she barely touched. People waved at her when they walked by, carrying colorful shopping bags or walking their dogs, their faces obscured behind large sunglasses or wide brimmed hats.

She was in a bit of a sour mood. Last night a few new houses materialized in the neighborhood. That happened from time to time, whenever new residents made it to *where-the-fuck-ever* this place was. Claire wouldn’t have minded so much if it wasn’t also the equivalent of a great big reset button being pressed.

How was she supposed to find anything in a place that was constantly changing?

If nothing else, it was just creepy. It wasn’t as though there’d been empty lots before. One day the street sort of *shifted*, and the next thing she knew, there was a whole new house between two previously adjacent ones. And it always happened at night.

Speak of the devil, one of the new kids was currently running around like a total psycho. He’d passed Claire’s house several times already. Claire wondered when he’d realize he was basically running in circles, passing the same picket white over and over. As if hearing her thoughts, he came to a stop beside the red convertible.

She considered his poor dejected face for a few moments, ignoring her radio. The radio gave a particularly high pitched *screech*, rattling every window in the house. She turned it off with a huff.

“Hey, new guy,” she called out. “Newbie!”

He looked at her, and she gestured for him to come on in.

She grabbed a glass of orange juice for the boy because she’d been raised with *some* manners. And also because, outside this crazy place was an even crazier world. Outside, hot food, clean water and a change of underwear were luxuries. Claire once watched a man beat another to death over a twinkie. *The banana flavored kind.* So when she could just… wish for something and get it, just like that? She could damn well spare some orange juice for her guest, make her parents proud.

Of course, both Jimmy and Amelia disappeared as soon as the boy came inside. Good manners were not taught at Pod People School, apparently.

The boy walked uncertainly into the kitchen. Up close, she could see that he was pale and skinny and taller than she was. His too long hair was windswept and a bit ridiculous. She handed him the juice and he looked surprised, although he drank it all in one gulp like… well, like anyone who ever had to fight for calories before, basically.

He also looked so rattled that, against her better judgment, she decided to take pity on him.

“I’m Claire.” She grabbed a notebook and jumped back to sit on the kitchen counter. What she was about to do was a bit risky. She only tried it once before. She was still alive and kicking, though, which must have meant it was all right.

Cas didn’t like it, but he could bite it.

“I’m Carl,” the boy said. “Um, I was trying to catch up with my mom. She said she was going to the store. Do… Do you know where that is around here, maybe?” He looked at her hopefully.

“Don’t bother,” Claire told him. “Listen, since you’re new around here-”

“Where’s *here*, exactly?” he cut her off.

“Heaven,” Claire replied. He didn’t look very surprised so she asked, “Your mom’s dead, right? Aw jeez, don’t cry.”

“I’m not.” He glared at her through red-rimmed eyes but softened almost immediately. “I’m dead,” he stated. To his credit and to Claire’s everlasting relief, the tears never fell and his voice was steady.

“Well, if you’re in Heaven, you must be dead, right? Condolences,” she said cheerfully. “Do you want to know the ground rules?”

His eyebrows creased and he looked at her suspiciously, then nodded. He was evidently a little sharper than most of the kids who passed by her, so she gestured for him to come closer, and showed him what she wrote in her notebook:

*1. DON’T LOOK AT ANYONE WHO DOESN’T WANT TO BE LOOKED AT*
*2. TELL WHOEVER ASKS THAT YOU’RE HAPPY*

And underlined:

*3. REMEMBER THIS ISN’T REAL*

Out loud she said, “one: eat a full breakfast. Two: don’t be an asshole to the other kids and three: don’t play music too loud at night, especially if it’s crap.” She looked at him pointedly. “Think you can remember all of that?”

He nodded again.

“Awesome.” She ripped the paper out and into itty bitty little pieces. “So, is it just you then?”

“Just me what?” He asked stiffly.

She rolled her eyes. “Did you show up here alone?”

Carl nodded. Then he froze in horror. And then he ran out the door.

“Well, you’re welcome!” Claire called after him, adding a muttered, “dick.” She jumped off the counter and went to sit in her stool. She turned the radio back on.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” she muttered. “*Language*.”

# Heaven Is a Place on Earth

Chapter Notes

> Stayed up way too late so I could publish this today. Sorry for more than the usual amount of errors.

*...was an old friend of Bobby. Ha, I say "friend". Nice lady, don't find many decent people left lately…*

A human would have collapsed from exhaustion a long time ago. It had been… many days, since Castiel was first brought to what he thought of as his prison. His legs should have given in, standing for so long, and his neck should have been at least horribly cramped, held taut as it was by the collar. And yet, Castiel had never felt more removed from his vessel, despite the fact that he was still technically inhabiting it.

It was an odd feeling, to feel so powerful, so saturated with heavenly power, and yet so helpless at the same time.

Heaven's light was flowing through him, nourishing his grace. His wings were spread out for maximum efficiency, the sigil-etched chains making sure their form remained true. The Enochian, Aramaic and seventh-century Nahuatl scripts on his prison's walls amplified his grace's ability to recharge.

It was unnatural. An abomination of an Angel's natural condition. He was burning out.

To make things worse, the amount of energy coursing through him made it ever so difficult to concentrate. He was in his prison. He was with Claire. He was trying to listen to his visitor, who was currently - and very cheerfully - strengthening the painted sigils on the walls. He was trying to listen to prayers.

Oh, how he tried.

*...thought he was gonna cry. They were even growing radishes out there, I mean, end of the world, and you're making friggin' radishes?...*

"Does this looks right to you?"

Castiel opened his eyes. The man, his daily visitor, was contemplating the piece of the wall he had just repainted. He placed his brush behind one ear, completely missing the fact that the red paint was dripping onto his shirt. He was an uninspiring figure in Castiel's eyes. Dressed in clothes that, Cas learned, were considered quite unfashionable for the current culture and region.

"I think," Castiel said, concentrating great efforts on activating his vessel's vocal cords, "that you misspelled *Qephetzial* ." He took an unnecessary deep breath to help himself focus. "You should… try *Kaf* instead of *Kuf* ."

The funny little man looked like he was considering the alteration for a moment, but then thought better of it. He put his hands on his hips, leaned to the left and said, in frank amusement, "Oh you."

Pulling a small notepad from his pocket, he flipped through the pages before he found the right one. "Aha!" He said, retrieving his paintbrush from behind his ear. He spared Castiel another amused look. "You almost got me."

Castiel would've sighed if he could spare the attention.

*...they don't know anything.... got something decent to eat for once. I say she was a nice lady, yeah?...*

*...out now, Cas, I really am….you're getting this…*

*...find you, I promise…*

*...where are you, man?...*

***

Carl had no idea which house was supposed to be his.

He was so focused on chasing after Lori, that he didn't realize he was leaving Judith. His mom said to watch after his little sister. It was literally her *dying request* . The first thing she asked him again. And he let her down.

Where the hell (where the heaven?) did he wake up?

All the houses looked the same. A few small variations: a potted plant or two, a vine growing along an outer wall, a different type of mailbox. Nothing that called out to him as familiar. Also: was there really mail in heaven? Were they getting, like, bills? *Was there a postman?*

Carl was *not* panicking. He was, very possibly, dreaming. Or high. Was he high?

He kept passing by the same houses too, about a dozen of them in all. It was very odd - to his perception, the street was as straight as it could go, but Carl still seemed to be wandering around in circles.

He considered asking for help - there were a few people up and about. Only, he remembered Claire's advice: don't look at people who didn't want to be looked at. Fortunately for him, a young girl came onto his path all by herself.

"Are you *lost* ?" she asked, incredulously. She was about eight years old, with red bushy hair and face full of freckles. And she didn't seem to have a problem meeting Carl's eyes.

“I don’t know where I live,” he admitted. “Can you help me?” She looked like she was considering it, so he added, “please?”

She sighed like she was doing him a great big favor. “Well, the one you just left is Claire’s.” She pointed. “The one with the green door is mine - I’m Susan. *Not* Susie.” She glared until he mumbled an “okay”.

“All the houses on the left side have been here before, so they can’t be yours,” she said. “And on this side there are three new ones. Also,” she looked at him pityingly, “there are names on all of the doors.”

“Oh,” Carl said, sheepishly. “Thanks.”

He found his own house quickly enough after that. It was the house with the different mailbox after all. Susan-not-Susie tagged along, apparently having decided he was worth following around. The front door was wide open, and he could hear the TV was on in the living room.

“Mom?” he called. “Are you home?” He paused at the living room entrance. “Dad?”

Rick was sitting in an armchair in front of the TV in an angle to the door, his hand on the armrest and his profile in view.

“Dad?” Carl said again, surprised. “You’re here too?” Carl was about to walk into the livingroom, to face his dad, but Susan stopped him by grabbing onto his T-shirt. She mouthed *don’t* .

“I’m always here, Carl,” Rick said, way more serenely than Carl had ever heard known him to be. “How is your day going?” A pause. “Are you happy?”

Unnerved, Carl took a step back. “It’s okay.” A kick from Susan. “Yeah, I’m happy. Like, super happy. Is Judith here?” Oh God, was Judith going to be all weird too?

“You should check on her,” Rick said. “She misses you.” His finger flickered the remote, the TV changing to some nature documentary.

Carl didn’t need to be told twice. He found Judith’s room: it was a very pink, and just about overflowing with stuffed animals of all shapes and sizes. No Judith, though. No Judith, no Mom. And… no Dad. Or maybe Carl wasn’t the only one who was high.

“Hey, is that her?” Susan said, pointing to the window. She squinted. “She’s just a baby.”

Peering through the window, Carl saw that Susan was right. Judith was in the backyard, sitting on a little blue blanket. And she wasn’t alone. There was a strange man sitting next to her, holding out a little plastic toy for her to take.

Carl grabbed the discarded baseball bat from the hallway.

“Who are you?” Carl demanded as he burst into the yard.

The man jumped to his feet. He was a white guy who looked to be in his 40s. He had a very straightforward look: clean shaven, his dark hair beginning to thin, combed and parted to the side. He was dressed in khakis, white sneakers and a green polo shirt. In any other circumstances, Carl would have thought he looked completely harmless.

“I said, who the hell are you?” Carl repeated, trying to look as menacing as he could look in pajama pants.

“Brian! I’m Brian,” the man squeaked, taking a step back. “Um, so, bro, how’s it hangin’?” He raised his hand, holding it out for a … fist bump?

“...What?”

The man cringed. “Sorry. It’s just that you’re a bit outside my normal age range.” He looked at Judith fondly.

“Back off, asshole!” Carl snarled, and raised his baseball bat.

Judith, startled by the aggression, started to cry. That sort of behavior at least was normal, thank God. The guy, Brian, had at least a good enough sense to back up a few more steps, enough to allow Carl to feel safe enough to let go of his bat and pick up his crying sister. It was an awkward few minutes, with Carl simultaneously rocking and shushing Judith, all the while glaring daggers at the stranger.

“Hi Susan,” the guy said, breaking the silence. He was cowering by the edge of the yard. Susan, who was watching everything with great interest, simply rolled her eyes at him.

“Brian, he’s not going to *eat you* .” She turned to Carl. “Brian is afraid of big kids, I don’t know why. He’s the one who brought us all here. Is that your sister? What kind of name is Judith for a baby, anyway?” She stepped up to them, peering curiously. “She’s so little. How come the biters haven’t eaten her?”

“Susan!” Brian admonished. “You know we don’t talk about *them* here.”

“Wait, *you* brought us here?” Carl questioned. Brian nodded. “…Is this really Heaven?”

“Yeah! Totally.” Brian squeaked. He then cleared his throat, embarrassed.

“So you’re like, what, an angel?” Carl asked. Judith was still crying, throwing her entire weight backwards in a tantrum. She was getting big: Carl was struggling to keep a hold on her.

“...Yes. Absolutely.” Brian was nodding his head enthusiastically. “I’m an angel.”

“...Huh.”

Brian added, “I was just checking to see how you and Judith were settling in. How do you like everything so far? Does your room look okay?”

*Tell anyone who asks that you’re happy* , Claire had said. So Carl nodded. “Yeah... Everything’s cool.”

“Awesome!” Brian beamed. “I’ll be going, then, still need to check in on Mikey, y’know. I’ll be around. Don’t worry, you won’t see me. Susan, Judith, you two have a *wonderful* day.” He gave them a funny little salute, and then winked. “And you too, Carl!” He gave him a thumbs-up and then just - disappeared.

“I’m definitely high,” Carl said after a moment, nodding to himself. “Michonne is going to kill me.”

# Don’t Fear The Reaper

Chapter Notes

> Once again, I’m posting this in a hurry. I apologize for any mistakes made, etc etc. I have to catch a flight for a business trip in a few hours (so grown up) so I expect the next update will be next weekend. To make up for it, I hope you enjoy this slightly longer chapter.
>
> A quick note about warnings. I’ve decided to avoid content warnings as to not spoil the plot. The story will only get as dark as the source material, which is... plenty dark on its own. I am aiming for a mix of heartwarming and soul crushing, just saying. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to drop me a comment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Days came and went, and there was no sign of any of the kids.

There were a few in Alexandria who were of the opinion that Carl, Enid and Mikey ran away on their own. Maybe to join a different group, somewhere, and taking Judith with them as a safeguard to ensure their acceptance, wherever that was. The only person stupid enough to air that particular theory out loud ended up knocked to the ground, and was only spared a worse fate by someone else stepping up to stop Glenn, of all people, from hitting the mouthy idiot in the face.

A far more common theory was quickly settling in most people’s minds: the Saviors did it.

There were not many people left to defend Alexandria with Rick spending more time outside the walls than in. That was *stupid*, he knew that, but… Rick had always been a man of action first and foremost, and pending attack be damned, he could not sit idle while the kids were out there somewhere, possibly held by people who had a very real grudge against them. Rick’s instinct was to go out there and look for his children.

He was constantly being reminded of that desperate search for Sophia, only a few years past, though it seemed like a lifetime ago. That similarity was the reason Carol had left them, or so Rick assumed. She didn’t actually stick around long enough to explain herself. Regardless of

her reasons, Carol was one of their more capable fighters, and with Morgan chasing after her, they were quickly running low on fighting power.

Rick was trying his damndest not to resent Carol for leaving them *now* . He wasn't having much success at it. They had spent *weeks* searching for Sophia. *Rick* had spent weeks searching for Sophia. Mapping search paths and combing acres of woods for traces of the lost little girl. After all they've been through, it *hurt* that Carol wouldn't do the same for Carl and Judith.

It wasn't just Carol who went away. Michonne was there, but she was… closed off to him. Rick always displayed his emotional distress openly. Michonne hid hers under a dozen layers. Rick couldn't begin to guess what was happening inside her head, and he was not able to stop her from leaving Alexandria on her own again and again, but he knew she was out there tearing the world apart looking for his - their - children.

They sent out more search parties. Not everyone came back. As they suspected, the Saviors were far from eliminated, and when they encountered them again, they had lost Denise in the exchange. Rick had been leading his own search party at the time and wasn't there to stop Daryl from going after the Saviors on his own, nor to stop Glenn from chasing after him.

Alexandria was as close to defenseless as it ever was. They were spread pretty thin. Rick didn't know why the Saviors were not attacking yet - it was the perfect opportunity. To top it off, Maggie was sick. Exhaustion, stress, whatever it was, she was looking like death and Rick couldn't - wouldn't - lose another member of his family. They took the RV and made a beeline for the Hilltop to get her medical care.

Of course, it was then when the Saviors finally showed up. By nightfall, the Saviors managed to lure them into an ambush. Not only did the Saviors manage to outmaneuver them, they also managed to capture Rick's missing friends. The Saviors' leader - older guy, foul-mouthed, barbed baseball bat - loved hearing himself talk. On his knees with his family, with *Michonne* , vulnerable next to him, surrounded by more thugs than they could possibly take down on their own, Rick had no choice but to stay there and listen.

"I don't wanna kill you people, I want to make that clear from the get-go. I want you to work for me. And you can't do that if you're fucking dead, now, can you?" Negan went on and on. "I'm not growing a garden."

The only sound beside Negan's never-ending monologue was Rick's blood pumping in his veins and his people's frightened breaths. The Saviors were absolutely revering Negan in their attention, not one of them fidgeting or murmuring in the background. Past the indignation, past the horror, that quiet worship was what fried Rick's last aching nerve.

"Did you take my kids?" He rasped. He wasn't sure if he was hoping for a *yes* or a *no* .

"See, the boys mentioned you might ask that," Negan said thoughtfully. "I gotta tell you, Rick, I feel for you. I do. But you killed my people, a whole fucking damn shit lot of them." He raised his eyebrows. "You shanked them in their sleep." Adding, "you know they all crapped their beds, right? Blood and shit everywhere, and I do mean *everywhere* ."

He continued. "I've seen some fucked up shit in my day, but that, my friend, takes the absolute-fucking-cake." He paused, and snickered. "And I sure as *shit* know my *shit* from *shit* . *I've been to Vietnam."*

Pointing the bat at Rick's face, he added in a voice that dropped to an intimate level. "So let me tell you, when you say that shit to me, after everything that you did?" He tsked. "That hurts my feelings." Negan shook his head. "Sorry Rick, I didn't take your damn kids. But I'll tell you what - we'll be sure to keep an eye out for you."

And the worst part was, Rick thought, the crazy son of a bitch actually looked sincere.

"But you still gotta fucking pay. So now? Now I am going to beat the holy fuck fucking fuckety fuck out of one of you." Negan twirled his baseball bat.

What followed was one of the worst nights of Rick's life.

***

Days came and went, and Carl kept catching glimpses of his parents.

Claire was only half right. It wasn't about actively looking at anyone, it was just that he *couldn't* . His parents were around, tending to the lawn, or making dinner, or watching TV… but always half hidden, their backs either turned, or standing just out of Carl's direct line of sight. They would get close if he ignored them - once, while eating cereal, his mom ruffled his hair - but if he tried to look at them, they'd back away, and if he tried to corner them, they'd simply vanish.

And it wasn't just his parents. With the exception of Brian, all the adults seemed to belong to the scenery. The people he passed in the street, the ice-cream vendor who went by twice a day, the other parents… they were all like his mom and dad. Background people. And… they felt wrong.

The only people who seemed to be real were the other kids. There weren't many, though Carl had the impression that there used to be a lot more of them. There were a few other younger kids besides Susan (although she hated to be lumped with them), and a few other teenagers as well.

Mikey, who Carl knew from Alexandria, rarely left his "house". Claire took to calling him a Stockholm, whatever that was. There were the twin brothers Jake and Scott, who were downright mean to one another, but were never found apart. And of course, Claire, who had been around the longest. At "eighteen the last time I bothered to count," she was the also oldest of them.

Also, there was Enid. Carl actually found her on their first day there. He was still in the backyard with Susan and Judith, and he happened to look up. Enid was sitting high up on a tree, straddling a branch with her back to the trunk.

"Hey Carl." Enid had said when he called out to her. There was something odd about her voice. "I just saw my parents."

"Yeah, me too." Carl replied.

“Everyone’s moms and dads are here,” Susan informed them matter-of-factly. “Even the dead ones.” She was crouched next to Judith on the little blanket where Carl had put her. The red headed girl seemed to find Judith fascinating, as if she had never actually seen a toddler up close before.

“My dad is alive,” Carl said. “I mean, he was, last time I saw him. And I don’t remember dying. I just remember going to sleep.”

“*Nobody* remembers dying,” Susan said. She looked at him conspiratorially. “*Nobody* . Get it?”

Susan, Carl learned, had been there the longest after Claire. She was traveling with a ragtag group of survivors before she woke up in Heaven, together with two other children from her group. They weren’t around anymore.

“They weren’t happy,” she said, with a pointed look. “So Brian took them back.”

Carl wasn’t sure what he felt about Brian, that funny little guy who claimed he was an Angel. He visited often, and even when he wasn’t around, Carl had the strange sense that somebody was watching them. The guy seemed harmless, actually looking more afraid of Carl than anyone who could *teleport* really ought to be. He also seemed very interested in Carl and Judith’s well being, asking them multiple times if they were happy about where they were. Stressing that *Heaven* wasn’t a prison, and that if any of them *really* wanted to go back, he would make it so.

He seemed earnest, but Carl’s instincts told him to be careful. Both Claire and Susan obviously thought that *going back* wasn’t a good thing, and not just because of the walkers. So Carl played along, too.

“I don’t really understand anything,” he told Susan, who had taken up to following him and Judith around constantly. The girl had shrugged and resumed her attempts at teaching Judith to fetch. Carl gave up trying to explain to her that Judith wasn’t a dog. Actually, he was starting to think the girl was just messing with him. It was nice having someone to talk to, anyway.

Enid shook herself out of the dreamlike state eventually, and took to following Claire around during the day. What they were doing, Carl wasn't sure, but it mostly involved sitting around listening to the radio. Or, more accurately, listening to the radio *static* . Except for their initial written communication, Claire hadn't bothered (or hadn't wanted to risk?) explaining anything else to him. And she only laughed like a lunatic when Carl pointedly handed her the Etch A Sketch he found in Judith's room.

With nothing else to do, Carl - with Judith in a little stroller, because he wasn't letting her out of his sight - spent his days exploring. Susan showed him that if he followed a path between the houses, he would end up in a park that was strangely not visible from the main street. There was a little dirt road that made a great path for Judith's stroller. The park was huge, and despite the constant sinking in his stomach that yelled out *wrong wrong wrong,* Carl had fallen in love with it.

It was a mix of wild and orderly. Impossibly tall trees of all kinds created a canopy above their heads, their leaves varying shades of greens and reds, as if they couldn't decide if it was Autumn or Spring. Entangled in their branches were Christmas lights of every color, so that even after dark, the park was always warmly lit. There was a small lake with black and white swans that didn't take offense to anyone who swam up to them, and an enormous playground that the younger kids enjoyed (except for Susan who turned her nose at such things). Some of the older kids too… only, so they said, ironically.

Carl was sitting on a swing, with Judith in his lap, when the ground started to shake. Susan was on the swing next to his, pretending to be indifferent to it, except for the way she kept kicking her legs to swing higher. She was also glaring at a young boy, Oliver, who kept coming up with reasons to talk to her.

"I think he likes you," Carl teased, and she turned her glare to him. She opened her mouth to reply, but her glare turned confused when the tremors started - slow at first, but gradually increasing. Both she and Carl were on their feet a moment later.

"Hey, all of you, get down," Carl called out to the other children. He wasn't actually sure what he was supposed to do during an earthquake when it took place while he was outside, but he assumed swinging on monkey bars wasn't it. And technically, it wasn't an earthquake, was it? A Heaven-quake just sounded weird. Like a fancy dessert name.

With Judith in his arms, he herded the kids toward the main path. Besides himself, Susan and his sister, there were three younger kids. Oliver, who looked a couple of years younger than Susan, had brown curly hair and the biggest green eyes Carl had ever seen. There was also Annabelle, who very shyly told Carl she was nine and originally from Texas, and another little girl around that same age who was called Daliah and spoke very little English.

They didn't scream or cry - kids who grew up with walkers in the neighborhood learned quickly not to do that, or they wouldn't grow at all - but Carl could read the alarm on their faces.

"It's gonna be okay," he told them. The Christmas lights made an almost musical sound as they clinked together overhead. "It'll be over soon."

The ground continued to rumble in increasingly powerful waves. They stumbled down the path, struggling to remain upright and losing their footing once or twice. Carl was helping Daliah climb up to her feet, more shaken than bruised, when he himself lost his ground and barely managed to avoid squashing Judith between himself and the path.

"Okay, guys, stop," he called out. "Let's just wait this one out." They huddled together in the shade of a sturdy looking oak. Judith was whimpering, although Carl barely heard her over the ringing in his ears. The rumbling seemed to be accompanied by an increasingly loud sound he couldn't describe if he tried.

There was electricity in the air, and it seemed to be increasing. With a sudden sense of foreboding, Carl shouted, "get down!" and covered as many of kids as he could with his own body. The lights *exploded* , raining glass all around them. They were suddenly in complete darkness. A voice he recognized as Susan's cried out in alarm, and he felt her clutching his arm.

"It's okay," he said. "It was just the lights. Everyone all right?"

There was a murmuring of voices. Judith was frightened and crying, her face buried in his shirt. Besides that, everything was silent. The ringing had stopped. The ground was still.

“Why is it so dark?” Annabelle whispered.

She was right, Carl noticed, startled. It shouldn’t be this dark, even with the lights out. It was still *daylight* a few moments ago, although dusk was approaching. Looking up, he couldn’t even see the stars beyond the trees.

“I don’t know,” Carl said honestly. “Okay, can… can you all grab each other’s hands? We’ll walk together. Susan, hold onto my shirt.”

They all stood up shakily, and with Carl leading the way, tried to make their way out of the woods. He felt Susan trembling as she all but walked pressed against Carl’s side. *She’s afraid of the dark* , he thought, and with the arm not holding onto Judith, patted her shoulder in what he hoped was an assuring way.

“What’s going on?” He asked her, quietly so that the other children wouldn’t hear. “Has this ever happened before?” He felt rather than heard her shake her head.

After what felt like a lifetime of stumbling around in the dark, Carl noticed a light up ahead. “Hey!” he called out. “Over here!” It was Claire, along with Enid, Mikey, and the twins Jake and Scott. Claire was holding a flashlight, its light seemed unnaturally bright and pure after so long in the dark.

“What are you guys doing?” Carl asked when the other teens approached. Claire’s flashlight really was incredibly bright, not simply beaming in a column like Carl would’ve expected, but brightening the entire area they were standing in, as if they were hanging out inside a bubble of light.

“Hiking, asshat, what does it look like?” Jake said. Raising an eyebrow at the younger kids, he told Carl, “nice of you to bring backup.” Jake and his brother were both dark skinned and dark haired, but that was where the similarity ended. They weren’t identical. Jake was tall and broad, handsome in an obvious sort of way. Scott was almost a head shorter than his brother, and seemed frail in comparison.

“Shut up, Jake,” Claire said, with resigned familiarity. To Carl and the kids, she added, “are you guys okay?” Oliver, Annabelle and Daliah rushed forward to glomp her in a hug. Susan stayed by Carl’s side, still clutching his shirt. In the newfound light, Carl was dismayed to see Susan looking so shaken.

Enid, Carl noticed, was holding Claire’s little radio. She sent Carl a fleeting smile.

“Sorry about all of this,” Claire told them after a few moments spent hugging the younger kids. She patted Oliver’s curly hair. “This was the only way we could talk without anyone listening in. I...um, wasn’t exactly sure when it would happen,” she said and glared at the radio.

“Claire’s hearing voices,” Jake informed them, and Carl didn’t need to look at him to know he was smirking. “She’s been trying to find a way out of this place.”

“Why would we want to leave?” Mikey asked. “This is *Heaven* .”

Scott said softly, “you haven’t been here long. Sometimes kids disappear, the younger ones, or… the troublemakers, I guess. Brian says he’s taken them home, but…” he bit his lips, clearly conflicted.

“What is he?” Carl asked. “Brian. I can’t wrap my head around him.”

“I’m not absolutely sure,” Claire admitted. “My friend Castiel - the one I’ve been talking to - he says that Brian’s something called a… Zanna? They’re like, kids’ imaginary friends. Only they’re not supposed to be strong enough to go against Cas, or to do any of this, really. And he says they never hurt kids before.”

“Imaginary friend?” Jake asked, after a moment of stunned silence. “You can’t be serious.”

“Well, he’s not an Angel.” Claire argued.

“I know him,” Scott, Jake’s twin, blurted out. “I mean, I didn’t realize it before, but when I was really young I had an imaginary friend called Brian. He was… like my dad, back then.” He didn’t meet anybody’s eyes when he said, “our real dad was… um, he wasn’t a good man.”

“Dad was a handsy son of a bitch,” Jake agreed, darkly cheerful.

Scott shrinked, and mumbling, he added, “this can’t be Heaven if our dad’s here with us. It can’t be.”

“You can’t trust Brian,” Claire said, kindly. “Scott, you know that, right?”

Without meeting her eyes, Scott nodded.

“So what,” Jake said, “we’re supposed to trust you instead? Because a voice on the radio tells you stuff? A voice that, by the way, only you can hear?” He snorted. “In case the newbies didn’t realize.”

“I can hear him too,” Enid said calmly. “And I know this isn’t Heaven.”

“Because you’re the expert now?” Mikey said, looking bewildered and even more out of his element than he normally did.

“When my parents were alive, I could never ever get them to shut up,” Enid started, looking uncomfortable but determined. “My mom would go around asking stupid stuff like... like, how I’m feeling, how’s my day going. She’d say, ‘it’s okay to be sad, Enid’. *I hated it* . Like, Mom, all my friends are dead and monsters are trying to eat me. How do you think I feel? But she never stopped.”

She continued, “and… and my dad always tried to cheer me up with these *stupid* knock knock jokes. Who even tells knock knock jokes anymore?” She paused for breath, and said, in a soft voice. “They’re here, but they feel wrong. They don’t actually talk to me. They ask me if I’m happy but they don’t actually care. It’s not really them, they’re more like… echos, I guess.”

“I know the rest of you feel that too,” Claire said after a moment of silence. “You feel it. Something is wrong with this place.”

“Even if we believe you-” Jake started.

“Of course you believe her,” his brother interrupted. “You *hate* it here.”

“Even if,” Jake insisted. “This whole place just goes on and on in circles. How the hell are we supposed to get out?”

“We could kill Brian,” Oliver, the six year old, suddenly piped in. The rest of them stared at him uncomfortably, although, Carl would bet, they were all thinking the same thing. Theirs was just that sort of world. Claire gave Oliver another pat on the head.

“We might get stuck here, little guy,” she said, looking like she wanted to laugh. To everyone, she said, “Cas says we need to look for something that’s out of place. That sort of thing would be like an exit.” She bit her lips. “Or, wish for something that’s out of place? Wish for the door? Sometimes he gets… confused. It’s hard to make sense of.”

The little radio in Enid’s hands was coming back to life, the little red light blinking into existence. Then it *screeched* , loudly enough to make them cover their ears.

“Damn it, they’re coming back.” Claire sighed when the silence returned. She turned her flashlight off. “Remember what I said. *Anything that’s out of place.* ”

And suddenly, Carl could see stars again.

Chapter End Notes

I find it sort of funny how American television can graphically show a man being beaten to death or ripped to shreds, but painstakingly censor the word “fuck”. I obviously went with the uncensored Negan version, because that was just too delightful to leave out (I needed to listen to the clip on YouTube a few times to make sure I was transcribing every “fuck” right).

What do you guys think of the original characters? And the direction this story is going? I would love to hear your thoughts. Anyway, hope you enjoy, and see you again in a week! XOXO

# Land of Gods and Monsters

A knocking drew Castiel's fractured attention back to his vessel.

He opened his eyes with effort. The prison was a darkened chamber that seemed to sway unsteadily, making the chains ring. A single light bulb hung from the ceiling. Unusually, it was lit, although its effect was lost among the heavenly glow that Castiel was unwillingly emitting. He could see that the heavy, rusted iron gate was open. The man standing just outside the door was knocking on it, quite tentatively.

He wore plain clothes and had an unimpressive physique. If it wasn't for his grotesque face… no, a mask, Castiel realized. It was a welding mask. Castiel had seen men wearing those in the past, to protect their eyes and faces from flash burn and hazardous sparks. However, he had never seen anyone use such a device to protect themselves from heavenly power.

"Hello Brian," Castiel finally spoke. For it could only be the Zanna.

"Hi there." Brian waved from the threshold, voice slightly muffled. He seemed reluctant to enter the chamber. His covered face bobbed a little as he scanned Castiel's form, from chained wrists to chained wings. "Are you in any pain?" he asked in a soft voice.

"Why… are you here?" Castiel said with great effort.

"Um, I thought you wanted to know how the kids are doing. Okay, that is, they're doing okay. They're happy," Brian said. "I just thought you wanted to know." He fiddled nervously with his helmet. "I'm sorry we had to put you through this, I didn't realize it was this bad." There was a heavy sigh behind the mask. "But we're doing the right thing, you've got to know that, right? The kids always come first. I know your people didn't want to help, and that's not your fault. You're *Castiel* , everybody knows you care about humanity. So you of all people have to understand, you have to."

“You… don’t know.” Castiel closed his eyes for a moment, focusing all of his attention on his vessel’s ability to speak, knowing he had to be clear, to bring the message across. “You don’t know you’re hurting them-”

“What? No!” Brian exclaimed, scandalized. “No, never. We’re Zanna. We don’t hurt kids, not ever.” He stepped into the chamber finally, all nervousness gone. Finger poised as if to poke Castiel in the chest, he said, “I’m doing *my job* . Do you know how many times I had to watch my charges…” Brian gave a shuddering breath. “Until this whole *situation* with the undead is resolved, and the world gets better, I’m going to make sure my kids get to *be* kids.”

“They don’t want to… stay.” Castiel pushed the words out. “The others...where... do they... go?”

“Um, back. Of course?” The Zanna sounded baffled. “Or anywhere else they want to go. I’m always hoping more will want to stay, we try so hard to give them a good home… But we take them back if they don’t want to stay, of course we do.”

“We? Not… you?”

“We all have our little functions,” a new voice suddenly exclaimed, causing Brian to jump, startled.

“Y’know how it is with management, nobody tells you anything, really.” The newcomer rolled his eyes. It was Castiel’s normal visitor, a portly little man who today was dressed in a garish combination of gold, red and green. He was carrying giant garden shears in one hand, the sight of which caused Castiel’s feathers to shrink close together. “Brian you silly goose, what are you doing back here?”

“Tal.” Brian looked as guilty as a huge blank mask could look. “I was just explaining the situation to Castiel-”

“Pfff, you’d be better off explaining table manners to werewolves,” the short man said, waving his hand dismissively. He walked into the chamber and grasped Brian’s shoulder, bodily steering him away. “Come on now, you’ve got work to do. What were you saying

about that little one from that group in Atlantic City? No need to bother old Castiel, can't you tell he's busy?" He pushed Brian out the exit, waving him away merrily. The iron gate closed with a heavy clang.

Tal's smile remained as he turned his attention back to Castiel, but there was something strained in it. His breath was fogging, despite the comfortable temperature in the room. For the first time Castiel sensed an aura of anger in him. Not a Zanna, Castiel thought to himself. Not with that air of malice hiding under the cheerful mask.

The chubby, friendly visage wavered, and suddenly Castiel was confronted with an older face: naked skin pale-blue and bloated, like a corpse that was left in the water and forgotten, eyes bulging and mouth full of razor sharp teeth. The vision snapped back, giving way to a silly little man in suspenders and colorful clothes.

"Tlaloc," Castiel sighed, dismayed, for he suddenly knew exactly what had happened to those missing children. The Aztec gods were always fond of human sacrifices. Tlaloc, more than his brothers and sisters combined, preferred the young.

"Aw, shoot," Tlaloc said, rubbing the back of his neck. "It's always harder to hide when I'm cranky." He pointed the shears at Castiel. "Which is your fault, by the way, I can't believe you turned the whole thing off and on again. Now the Zanna's going through a nervous breakdown. He's already started asking too many questions. Still, we're having fun while it lasts."

Tlaloc stepped closer. "I'm not a bad guy, you know? I like to help people."

"You...eat... children," Castiel said roughly.

"Not all the time!" Tlaloc protested. "We all have to eat. I mean, not you." He patted Castiel's wing. "But most of us." He grumbled, "you angels have it easy. You come in ready-made neat little packages. But my kind? Humans created me. They decided what to feed me, and they decided to forget me. And let me tell you, starving to death is *not cool.* "

"Your kind died… out."

The Aztec god nodded. “True. I was dead-slash-asleep for a long time. Imagine my surprise when I woke up to all of this.” He gestured vaguely. “A couple of humans were hiding out in a museum, someplace with lots and lots of artifacts from the good old days. A fight broke out - naturally - and someone managed to bloody one of my statuses, enough to wake me up.” He chuckled. “Boy, they were not expecting that.”

Tlaloc sighed sadly. “I got by, after that, but I was always so very hungry. Humans just don’t want what I can give them these days. Rain? Fertility? Not really in high demand in today’s market. And the few souls they are willing to part with? Eww, the things are so heavy with corruption, I might as well starve.”

He perked up and added. “But then you showed up! I was just about to eat that yellow girl. She drew you in, remember? Man,” he exclaimed. “Your kind’s just bursting with power. I could’ve stored hundreds and hundreds of sacrifices in you, back in the old days. Nowadays the pickings are slim. The Zanna’s been helping with that. Though lately he’s been bringing more and more strays along. Yuck. Still, I’ll be sorry to get rid of him.”

Castiel closed his eyes. The old god was using Brian to bring him children, whose souls were young enough to be unburdened and without much corruption. Castiel sensed that many of the children taken did not fit that description anymore. A few had taken lives already, in self-defense or otherwise. Yet the act of bringing them to the god, even unknowingly, must be enough to measure them as sacrifices.

“I’m probably boring you. You know how it is, as the years go by, you get wistful.” Tlaloc stepped behind Castiel, running his fingers along the displayed feathers. Castiel’s wings, the only exposed part of him that was truly him, shivered.

“I’m sorry I have to do this,” Tlaloc told him. “Honestly, I am. But I can’t have you flying after me if you ever get loose. It’s just a precaution, you see?” The shears made an ominous sound as they opened. “Also, your little stunt with the lights got me thinking: I’m pretty sure I can keep you running just fine without the extra juice. Thanks, by the way.” Castiel felt him position the shears over one of the long flight feathers. “Tell me if this hurts, will you?”

# Those Meddling Kids

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Enid couldn't sleep in her own house. She tried in those first few nights, tossing and turning in her bed. It was stupid, she thought, how she didn't feel safe enough to sleep in a big house, behind a door she could lock, with a full belly and no walkers in sight. She couldn't help herself; she needed to get out of that house, to get away from the ghosts.

She spent a few nights sleeping in Carl's bedroom, on the floor beside the crib Carl dragged in from Judith's room. She was obviously not the only one who didn't feel safe in their new house. If Carl ever noticed her there he didn't mention it, but more than once Enid woke up to find herself covered in a blanket she didn't remember going to sleep with. Still, she always left before Carl woke up properly.

During the days, Enid searched for a road that wouldn't lead her in circles. That was how she got to know Claire… and Castiel. Claire's head was down since she was looking at her radio. She bumped straight into Enid. Despite the fact that they had literally knocked their heads together, the impact didn't hurt. The radio flew out of Claire's hands.

Enid went to pick it up when she heard, among the static, " *Claire, are you alright* ?"

"She's fine," Enid answered on Claire's behalf, and tried to hand the radio back. The other girl looked surprised.

" *Oh, hello Enid. I didn't realize you could hear me as well,* " The voice said. When Enid thought about it later, she realized she couldn't really tell if the voice sounded male or female, young or old. She could still hear the static, but as the voice spoke, she heard it less and less. " *It would be best if you didn't acknowledge me at all. Most cannot comprehend my voice in this form. I also worry for your safety if those in charge knew I was speaking to you,* " the radio explained. " *Nevertheless, it is my pleasure to finally meet you. My name is Castiel* ."

"That's my favorite radio station," Claire said with a shaky smile.

The three of them continued to have the strangest conversations over the next few days. Enid and Claire took incredible care to speak in double meanings, sometimes exchanging urgently discarded notes. Castiel would fill in the blanks, sometimes, but was incoherent more often than not. Sometimes he sounded (felt?) confused: repeating the same sentences over and over again, as if he was stuck in some sort of timeloop. Other times, he forgot he was speaking to Claire and Enid, addressing someone called *Dean* instead (a name that never failed to make Claire flinch, frown, or react in some negative way).

Enid learned Claire and Castiel were trying to find a way out. She learned that Claire was brought to heaven about a year ago, and that Castiel was taken prisoner at the same time. Those events were connected, even if Castiel's explanations were confusing, to say the least. Still, Enid found that she trusted the strange duo instinctively, despite herself.

She and Claire struck a fast friendship. Enid started spending the nights in Claire's bed. It felt innocent, like the sleepovers with her two best friends when she was ten and the only monsters in her life were the ones on TV. They used to have whispering conversations in the dead of night then, too. Even if the topics were incredibly different, it still felt so familiar to Enid.

"I'm from Illinois originally," Claire told her. "My dad, he left us. All of our relatives were super religious, so my mom fell out of touch with them. It was just the two of us for the longest time, even before everybody started getting sick."

"It feels like a lifetime ago," Enid said softly. She was lying on her back, eyes fixed on the motionless ceiling fan. "Remember how everyone thought it was a big hoax?"

"Yeah, it was just before Halloween. All the kids at my school were going to dress up like Zombies," Claire said. "Then they said it was some kind of bird flu outbreak. My school was an evacuation zone at some point, but I think it was overrun. My mom and I decided to board ourselves up at home, actually. Best decision ever, until the food ran out. Then we sort of drifted with one group or another."

"It was always just me and my parents," Enid said. "They treated it like some kind of an adventure in front of me, even if I was old enough to know better. It was so stupid the way they died. Our car broke down and they didn't notice the walkers were getting too close. My

mom could've taken them." Enid smiled. "She was so *badass* , you wouldn't've believed it if you saw her."

"The dead weren't really the problem in our case. My mom was just too trusting. I think I was the one protecting her most of the time. She still died defending me. We were with this group… they were insane. Like, total psychos." Claire let out a harsh little laugh. "They were going to kill me too, but, um, you-know-who showed up."

"How did you get away?" Enid asked.

"We *didn't* ."

The conversation was going a little too far into the forbidden territory, so Enid wisely changed the subject. "You know, I was on my own for a long time. Just surviving somehow. But then I ended up in Alexandria. This place kind of reminds me of it, now that I think about it."

"Really?"

"Yeah, before Carl and his dad came along. Then people started dying and it stopped being so… Pleasantville." Enid sighed. "It was going to happen anyway. It's a miracle the place was left standing for so long. It's better now, like, it's more real."

"I think I would like to see it. Someday." Claire admitted after a pause.

After the blackout in Heaven, things changes. It wasn't just the two (three?) of them anymore. For one thing, Enid wasn't the only one to spend the nights at Claire's house. It started with the three younger kids. They were clever to keep their mouths shut about it, but after the flashlight conversation, they stopped trusting the faceless creatures who posed as their parents. To make room, she and Claire removed all the furniture from the living room, and instead covered the floor with mattresses from wall to wall.

The next evening, Carl was dragged in by Susan, who never seemed to leave his and Judith's side anymore. "It makes sense!" Susan insisted. "Why are you being so stubborn?"

Carl glanced at Enid. He didn't really manage to hide his blush behind his long hair. He mumbled something that got lost under Judith's babbling voice.

"He's just afraid I'll cut his hair when he's sleeping," Enid mock-whispered to the little girl.

Susan rolled her eyes. She turned to Carl, and said very earnestly, "I'll protect you."

They were only missing the other boys, Mikey and the twin brothers Scott and Jake. It seemed unlikely they would come on their own, but then Claire, who hadn't forgotten Scott's confession about his dad, went ahead and asked the boy if he wanted to join them. Scott immediately said yes. His brasher brother scoffed, but showed up the following night just the same. Mikey, not wanting to be left out, joined as well. It was like a weird slumber party with a big age range that never actually ended.

Living so close together, and with a shared goal in mind, they all seemed to be getting closer. Their days were spent looking for that mysterious exit, "something out of place". Enid and Annabelle, who turned out to be a surprisingly good climber, searched the rooftops and the treetops. Carl even let Susan watch Judith for short periods of time, while he and the other boys went through each one of the houses. Most of the time they just seemed to be goofing off, happily making a mess of each room they visited. Even little Oliver helped in a way, crawling into the tight nooks and crannies the rest of them couldn't reach. The all combed through the woods, even scuba diving in the lake.

Brian, of course, popped up and wanted to know what exactly they were all doing. He seemed very pleased by Claire's excuses of slumber parties and treasure hunts.

It was… fun. Enid was actually having a great time, for the first time in forever. The nights were a bit crowded and both Enid and Claire were very firm about which side of the room the boys were allowed to sleep in, but it was kind of nice to just watch movies and fall asleep surrounded by people you knew were real. Even if Judith sometimes cried for no reason, or if Jake kind of snored, it felt good to know where everybody was. Enid fell asleep easily, lulled by a general feeling of safety.

It almost felt like a betrayal when Susan went missing.

Chapter End Notes

Penny for your thoughts?

# The Great Escapist

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Enid preferred to sleep next to the wall, just under the bird-shaped nightlight. It was Carl who had plugged it into the power socket one evening, and every night since a gentle blue hue brightened the place where they all slept. That morning the night light was flickering on and off, buzzing slightly every time the light sizzled out. It woke her up.

“It’s been doing that awhile,” said Claire.

Enid blinked, half asleep, at the older girl. Claire sat by the window, huddled in a nest of blankets. The dawning light created a halo around her messy blonde hair. She was always the first one to wake in the mornings. Enid knew she liked to count the houses on their street. The houses were not really identical, much as the street was not really endless. New houses meant new arrivals to their neighborhood. Kids who were taken in the middle of the night, just like the rest of them.

The blank look on Claire’s face told Enid all she needed to know. New houses meant new kids. Missing houses, however...

Enid sat up so she could better scan the room, studying each one of the sleeping lumps with a sinking heart. Who was missing? She couldn’t immediately tell. Finally, she realized there was an empty space between Annabelle and Daliah. The blanket and pillow were still there, rumpled and slept-in. She didn’t want to look, but if she did, she was sure she’d find a few strands of coarse red hair on the pillow.

“Claire?” her voice came out so small she hardly recognized it. Claire nodded once, her face crumpling for a single moment before that empty mask fell in place again. The radio Claire carried everywhere was nowhere in sight. Just as well: Castiel hadn’t spoken to either of them in days.

Everybody else was still peacefully asleep. The silence was far from comforting, disturbed only by the buzzing sound of the flickering light. Enid suddenly couldn’t stand to be in that room anymore. She picked herself up, carefully making her way between the sprawled

bodies. She paused only to put on her sneakers. She passed Claire's parents on her way out. Strangely, both of them were just standing there, unmoving.

Despite the early hour and the fresh dew collecting on the green grass, it was neither warm nor cold outside. It was very silent, the constant background noise muted. It was as if the whole place was reflecting the wrongness Enid felt. She looked for the house with the green door, looping the street at least a dozen times. At last she accepted the fact that it was truly gone.

Her feet carried her to the woods, through a path between the houses. As always, it gave way to tall trees carrying colors of all seasons, although the oranges, reds and greens seemed somewhat faded. The Christmas lights that used to hang from the branches were gone, the treetops looking incredibly naked without them. Their leaves ruffled gently, sadly, in the breeze.

She couldn't really cry. There was no point in crying. Claire didn't cry, and she'd been there for *a year.* How many missing houses were there in all that time? Not to mention Susan, and all the other kids that passed through this Heaven, could still be alive somewhere. They didn't really know. They had only their guts and the uncertain words of… some sort of presence, a voice without a voice… to tell them otherwise.

Enid realized she was crying. She rubbed her face furiously with her sleeve.

She walked for the longest time, always ending in the same places, no matter which direction she took. The lake, the playground, the grassy hill. All of those places that suddenly looked foreign and bleak. Even the swans were nowhere to be seen. She took off in a run, but again and again, she found herself going in circles.

Breathing constrained, she came to a stop next to a large oak. She fell back against the tree, the back of her head hitting its trunk. It made a dull, hollow sound.

Blinking in confusion, Enid looked back at the oak. Rooted in the tree trunk, and perfectly in sight, was a round little door. It hung a few feet above the ground, its wood painted a moss green. It was big enough for her to squeeze through, even though it didn't seem like there was anywhere to go. The oak was large but not huge. Somehow, Enid didn't think that mattered.

Swallowing, she reached for the door handle and pulled. A light so bright she couldn't stand to look at it engulfed her. Almost immediately she slammed the door close. Hand still on the handle, she rested her forehead against the little door. Enid couldn't help a small, teary laugh.

She turned on her heels and ran back to Claire's house.

It was chaotic. Everybody was gathered outside. The younger children were crying silently, clinging to Claire once again. They stood huddled together, unable to tear their eyes away from the conflict. Judith was howling in Scott's arms, heedless of his awkward attempts to calm her down. Jake and Mikey were both physically restraining Carl, who wasn't doing anything but standing still, looking like he *needed* to be restrained.

They were all looking at Brian who was rubbing his jaw in shock. Enid guessed someone had hit him, and she had a pretty good guess as to who.

"Just tell me what you did to her." Carl's voice was steady.

"Nothing!" said Brian. His eyes darted around wildly, pleading.

"If you hurt her-" and here Carl's voice did break. And damn it, Enid had been so preoccupied by her own feelings that morning, she didn't stop to think about Carl's reaction to Susan's disappearance. Even since they arrived, the little girl had followed Carl around. And he didn't mind, he didn't mind at all. He treated her like she was his little sister.

"How can you think that?" Brian asked, and the despair in his voice even stopped Carl. "I would never do anything to hurt any of you. I'm… listen to me. I only want to help you. I only ever wanted to keep you safe. I swear." He reached a hand toward Claire and the three younger children, silently asking for support. The children flinched, Oliver burying his face against Claire's side.

Brian looked like he'd been slapped in the face. In a shaken voice he asked, "do you *all* think that?"

None of them replied. Brian looked, well, devastated. In a soft voice he said, “Susan is my friend. My responsibility. You all are. I would never hurt you. Please. Please… believe me.” His voice broke and he shuddered. “Okay, okay, okay. I can fix this. Look, if she’s not here, it means my colleague must have taken her back. I’ll just go and check on her. I’m not supposed to, but I’m going to check up on her, I promise. I’ll go and check right now, okay? Just,” he held his palms out in a calming gesture. “Please, just wait for me. There’s got to be a reasonable explanation for all of this.”

A moment later he was gone.

“Let go of me,” Carl said quietly. The two boys let go of his arms. He sat down, collapsed actually, on the porch step, dropping his forehead on his knees. His hair fell over his face, hiding whatever might have been visible otherwise. Scott, still holding a crying and squirming Judith, sat down next to him, not saying a word.

“Well done, dumbass,” Jake said, without much feeling. “You just killed all of us.” He sat down on Carl’s other side, boxing him between himself and his brother. He put a comforting hand on Carl’s shoulder.

“We shouldn’t even be talking about this,” Mikey said, looking at all of them uncertainly. “Right?”

“Dude, the jig is up. He knows,” Jake said. Then he looked at Claire for confirmation, raising a thick eyebrow. “So, now what?”

“I don’t know,” Claire said softly.

“You don’t know much, do you?” Carl said, voice rough. He raised his head to look at her. “Susan followed your rules, she was *smart* . Your rules didn’t help her at all. Do you actually know anything useful?”

“Dude,” said Scott quietly, “cut it out, it’s not her fault.”

“Guys,” Enid said, softly. In all the commotion she almost forgot what brought her running to them. “I found the exit.” All heads swerved to look at Enid in shock.

“I’m pretty sure,” Enid answered the silent question. “Come on. I’ll show you.”

They followed her into the woods. To her everlasting relief, the door hadn’t disappeared. It stood there, innocently fixed inside the wood, until Enid opened it and let them see the burning light for themselves. They all turned their faces away, covering their eyes, all except for Claire, who for the first time that day looked *alive* .

“I can’t believe we didn’t see it before,” Claire said. “I must have searched this entire area about a hundred times.”

“Castiel said we wouldn’t be able to find the exit unless we really *wanted* to find it, didn’t he?” Enid said and shrugged. “Maybe you didn’t wish hard enough?”

Claire huffed in annoyance. “Or maybe I just didn’t notice it before. Whatever. Let’s get out of here.” Before they left the house, Claire had grabbed her radio. It was silent, despite the little light that said it was turned on. “Cas, any last warnings?” she said, and waited, but the radio stayed silent. She dropped it to the ground. “Guess not.”

“I’m not sure we could all actually fit,” Jake said, eying the little round door critically. “We don’t even know where this thing goes.”

Carl added, “what if it’s random? Could we end up in the middle of a herd? I can’t risk Judith.”

“I’ll go,” Claire said. “That was kind of the plan all along. Find the exit, then find Cas, and then he shuts this place down safely.” They all looked at her uncertainly. Enid sometimes forgot that the rest of them have never actually heard Castiel before, that only she and Claire had that particular ability.

“I should go with you,” Enid said. “I’m pretty sure I can squeeze through, too.”

“No,” Claire said, shaking her head before Enid finished speaking. “You’re the only one left who can talk to Cas. You need to stay here and monitor the radio. He’ll be your only link to me.”

“I don’t like this,” Jake said. “You have no idea what’s behind that door. We don’t even know that it *is* an exit.”

“It’s either this, or stay here and wait to be picked off one by one,” Claire countered. “Guys, let me do this. I *need* to do this.”

“Claire, I don’t want you to die,” blurted Oliver. She sighed and knelt down to hug him, then took his skinny little shoulders in her hands. “We’re all gonna be okay, but I need you to be brave now, okay buddy?” Oliver nodded. She squeezed his shoulders, then looked up at the rest of them. “Trust me, okay?”

Reluctantly, they nodded.

Claire stood up. She pulled the door open, and with a boost from Mikey, went through. Enid stared determinedly after her, ignoring the spots dancing in her vision. It wasn’t a dignified leap, the door was too small for that, but then Claire was gone all the same. Mikey slammed the door shut as he stood.

“Claire?” Carl called out. There was no reply, of course. They stood there for several long minutes, staring dejectedly at the little door.

“Fuck it,” Enid said, finally. “I’m going after her. Castiel. Cas, if you can hear me, wherever you are, just, um, just scream if everybody needs to haul out of here fast. Do that static thing. Okay?” Of course, there was no response.

“Okay,” she said. She didn’t bother saying goodbye, or even listen to their half-hearted protests. Wherever that little door took her, she was going to be *free* . And she *would* see them all again. Enid was a good climber. She didn’t need anyone to boost her up. Carl yelling her name was the last thing she heard before everything she even knew was *light* .

Chapter End Notes

I really wanted to use Enid’s tendency to run away as a character strength. Of course she’d be the one to find the way out if wishing for an out was really the way out :)

# This Soft Exterior

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Claire rolled onto her side, burrowing her face into the pillow. A shiver went through her, skin breaking out in goosebumps. She patted the mattress blindly, letting out a soft grunt when she couldn't find her blanket. Too tired to look beyond the bed, she curled around herself, rolling to her stomach and tucking her bare arms underneath her body. In the back of her mind, she wondered why her bedroom smelled like salt-water.

Memories came rushing back. With a gasp, Claire launched herself out of bed. The distance to the ground was farther than she thought; she landed *hard* , hitting her elbow and biting her tongue by accident.

"Ow." She wiped her mouth, noticing a small smear of blood on the back of her hand. Her right elbow throbbed awfully but at least it wasn't broken. She looked up to find she'd been sleeping in a bunk bed - the upper bunk - and it was the big kind that was meant for adults, not the kiddie stuff. She was lucky she didn't break her *face* with that little swan dive.

Claire flexed her left arm, smiling despite the pain but mostly because of it. After all, there was no pain in Heaven.

She stood on shaky legs, studying her surroundings. The room was drab and cramped. There was no sunlight coming in on account of the room not having any windows. A tired-looking light bulb hung from the ceiling, close to burning out but still managing to produce a dim light. The bunk bed took out most of the space. Opposite the bed, maybe two feet away, stood a tall metal locker (empty, she noted). There was also a folding table that was attached to the wall, and a little stool next to it.

She looked down at herself, surprised to find that she was in the same clothes she'd been wearing a year ago, except that her purple hoodie was gone. She remembered it getting splattered with her mother's blood. The murdering bastards had turned to her next, strapping her down to a table kicking and screaming like a banshee. Then, out of nowhere, Castiel had appeared. They never stood a chance. He was about to free her when… she couldn't remember what happened, it was just a blur of light and blood. She woke up in a place called Heaven and had been there ever since.

Claire's shoes were gone, too. She was left in thick wool socks, a pair of ratty jeans and a plain gray t-shirt. She checked her pockets, finding a flattened matchbox and a strip of Big Red gum she'd been saving up all those months ago. With a shrug, she popped it into her mouth, chasing away the sleep-taste, and threw the wrappings on the ground.

The door was unlocked when she tried it. She found a long hallway with a lot of doors, all of them bearing little number signs. It looked a little like a hotel corridor if the owner thought plastic floors were all the rage and sometimes forgot to pay his utility bill. Most of the fluorescent lights above her were dead, a few blinking in and out. There were no windows in the corridor, either. Claire startled a little at a sudden loud knock, like metal settling down.

"This isn't creepy at all," she mumbled.

She opened the doors one by one, each of them revealing another identical room. There were more doors than the kids she left behind in Heaven, but maybe, Claire thought, if she woke up here, the others were around as well. She grew more anxious at the sight of each empty room before finally, almost at the end of the corridor, she found someone.

The person sleeping in the lower bunk was Mikey, the teenage boy who had shown up together with Enid's group. Sometimes it happened like that: a single community was cleared out of everyone underage, Heaven's version of No Child Left Behind.

Out of all of them, Mikey was the one she knew the least. The boy was a little younger than herself, with pale skin and a bad haircut. What was it with the boys in their group, anyway? Alright, fine, they had bigger problems, but if they ever made it out of this, Claire was going to run Mikey and Carl both with some scissors. Maybe their shared manpain could help resolve whatever tension was lurking there. Claire meant to ask, but somehow it always slipped her mind.

"Mikey?" Claire shook his shoulder, finding his skin cold to the touch. "C'mon, Mike," she said, shaking more firmly. He was lying on his back in plaid pajama pants, arms resting straight at his sides. His thin chest wasn't rising and falling like it was supposed to - everything about him was far too still.

Teeth worrying her lip, Claire reached under his jaw to check for a pulse. Over a minute had passed before she felt it, and another minute until the next beat came. She exhaled slowly,

dropping her hand. Whatever curse they were under, it was clear she wasn't going to wake them up without some serious intervention.

"I'll be back," she promised, slipping out the door and making sure to shut it behind her. She might have been out of the game for a while but she still remembered that ghouls couldn't open doors. Who even knew if any were around? Lying there as he was, Mikey was an easy meal. And come to think of it, Claire wasn't much better off herself.

*I need to find a weapon* , she thought.

An idea came to her mind: she should mark the rooms where the other kids were, so she could find them again easily if she had to. Claire popped the gum out of her mouth and stuck it to the door. Kind of gross, but it did the job. Better than trying to remember all the room numbers, at least.

"I need to find a damn pen, too," she said out loud.

The end of the corridor brought a few interesting discoveries. She found a little one-person-sized elevator. She dismissed it almost immediately: the last thing she needed was to get stuck there. What caught her attention, however, was the man-sized sign by the elevator. She leaned in close, squinting in order to make out the words in the weak light.

"I'm on a ship," she realized. The floor beneath her feet felt surprisingly steady.

It must be huge, Claire thought, because there were a lot of levels (or decks, as the sign said). According to the sign, she was located fairly low at deck B, where the "temp. workers cabins" were located. The decks below seemed to contain mostly machinery and other technical sounding titles. She guessed she needed to go up instead. Luckily, where there was an elevator, there were also stairs. She found the entrance to the stairway at the next door.

Claire made another interesting discovery just beyond the stairway entrance: a large box hanging from the wall - a fire-aid. The box had a glass covering that bore the words *push in case of emergency* . Well, she had an emergency. The glass broke with little effort, caving forward easily and almost noiselessly like it was probably meant to.

“Hello beautiful,” Claire all but purred and plucked the axe from its hooks.

It was fairly light, she found, testing its balance. She checked the blade part, finding it duller than she’d like. A weak weapon is better than no weapon at all, but she still had no idea what sort of enemy she was about to face. How strong were the Zanna, exactly? She had a feeling she was going to find out. The dead were another potential problem, of course. if there were any ghouls around, she hoped they’d be rotten. Rotting ghouls had soft skulls.

The level above (C-Deck: Cabins A-D, Recreation Room, Gymnasium) was just another long corridor with personal cabins for the most part. The cabins were a lot more lived-in, the crew’s personal belongings scattered all around as if most of them had left in a hurry. She found a black marker, which she used on a couple of doors (Jake and Annabelle) and a box of stale chocolate bars that she chose to eat immediately.

She didn’t realize it before, but she was starving. Come to think of it, Claire remembered she’d been very hungry the day her mother died. They both hadn’t eaten in days. Possibly, that feeling stayed frozen until she woke up.

Oddly, the higher she went, the darker the decks seemed to be. The higher decks had much better accommodations overall (Claire was kind of peeved she’d been stuck in the crappy level). The cabins were larger, with a single bed and an en-suite bathroom for each.

In one of the spacious rooms, she found Carl. He was lying perfectly still, exactly like Mikey did, dressed in a white t-shirt and sweatpants. Like Mikey, he was also cold to the touch. He seemed to breathe, but only every other minute. Claire barely noticed all of that.

“What happened to you?” she whispered, staring at the bandage covering the right side of his face. Of course, Carl didn’t respond. For the first time, Claire was angry at herself for insisting the rest of them stay behind. The silence was unnerving and finding her friends’ sleeping, helpless forms shook her more than she’d ever admit.

Like she did for the others, Claire painted an X sign on Carl’s door. And angry sounding scream startled her; the marker fell, one edge of the X smearing down the door. She gripped

her axe tightly and made her way down the corridor. Following the scream was a loud crash and a pained cry. It was all coming from behind a large door labeled *Kitchen & Pantry* .

Claire dropped down to her hands and knees, peeking under the door gap. She couldn't see much, but this close she could hear a lot better. There were two men in the kitchen. One was wearing crocs, of all things. The other was hidden from her, but she could hear his pained groans.

Crocs was saying, "I wish it didn't have to be this way, buddy. We make a great team."

"You tricked me," gasped the injured man, whose voice Claire recognized. It was Brian.

"Eh," Crocs shuffled his feet. "I told a few white lies. Really, we were both getting what we wanted, weren't we?" He continued, ignoring Brian's pained no's, "you were living the *dream* , babysitting all those kids. I mean, a Zanna's dream-life is kind of *weird* but I'm not judging! We are all just as the humans made us, right?" he sighed wistfully. "We can't change what we are, buddy. Alright, I tricked you, but I was doing you a favor. Out there? You were wasting away. I gave you the power to be the protector you always wanted to be. Sure, the kids came and went but that's nothing new for your kind. That's the beauty of it, you've been doing just this your entire existence." Crocs' voice seemed to perk up a little.

"No," Brian gasped. " *No* . I'm a Zanna, a *Zanna* . We help kids, we *help* them... until they don't need us... anymore. We don't deliver them to be *butchered* ."

"Oh, come on, that's a bit harsh," Crocs protested. "It was very humane. *Humane* , funny word, isn't it? Free-range, organic…" he carried on. "If you think about it, I'm practically a vegetarian."

*He's been eating us,* Claire realized in horror.

Brian let out a sob. "I revoke it."

“Ex- *cu* -se me?” Crocs gaped.

“I revoke it. I know you can’t-” Brian’s breath rattled, and a long moment passed before he composed himself. “- *feed* without my per-” a gasp, “ *permission* .”

“It doesn’t work like that, you silly creature,” Crocs said, sounding angry. “You can’t un-gift a gift. You gave them away fair and square.”

“I didn’t give them to you!” Brian cried, and suddenly he was up, his feet appearing in Claire’s line of vision. The two men, creatures, fought. It was obvious Brian was losing badly, even if she could barely see it. It was over quickly: Crocs was standing over a sprawled Brian. Claire managed to see a glimpse of his face before Crocs dragged him out of sight. She heard a door slamming and then a deadbolt locking.

“Stay there and think about what you’ve done,” Crocs grumbled.

With a sinking heart, Claire realized he was coming her way. She scrambled back to her feet, flattening her back against the wall and waiting for the door to open. She gripped the axe tightly and swung it with all her strength.

The sharper end embedded itself in Crocs’ chest. For a moment they both stared at each other in surprise, Claire’s fingers still wrapped tightly around the axe handle. A smile crept up the man’s face, twisting his bulbous cheeks.

“Hello little girl,” he said, mouth full of pointed little teeth. “What are you doing out of bed?” The axe was still stuck in his chest but he paid it no mind, like he couldn’t even feel it.

Claire tried to run, but she only managed to turn her back before his hand was gripping a fistful of her hair. She screamed, half in anger, half in fear, and tried to drive her good elbow into his face. He used his grip on her hair to all but fling her against the nearest wall. The hit knocked her to the ground. A moment later she was scrambling to her feet. Blood dripped from her scalp and down her shirt; Crocs had uprooted a clump of her hair.

She wasn't fast enough to dodge his next assault. He was faster than his heavy frame suggested, grabbing hold of her by the arm and pushing her inside the kitchen. She half stumbled, was half pushed, against the industrial kitchen counter. She was barely able to contemplate running again when she felt a hand on the back of her head slamming her down against the counter. It must have knocked her out for a few seconds, because when she came to, Crocs was glaring down at her, framed by a doorway.

"You only have yourself to blame, you know."

"Fuck you," she snarled.

"Rude." Crocs all but pouted. He sighed, adding, "so, can I be honest with you? *I'm stuffed* . Seriously, can't have another bite right now. I need to watch my figure, you know?" He patted his bulging stomach, chuckling. "So… you'll just have to wait your turn."

" *Fuck . You* ."

Crocs pursed his lips primly. "Unbelievable," he muttered. "I guess I can have some dessert later. You," he pointed at her, "be a good girl and wait for me here. I need to make sure none of the other little birds flew the coop." And with that, he pushed the heavy door closed. Claire heard the deadbolt effectively sealing the room and trapping her inside in total, absolute darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Claire. Please let me know what you think! :)

# United We Stand

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Claire yelled out her frustration, fist hitting the floor beside her; it was sticky. Angry tears prickled her eyes. She squeezed them shut and took a few steadying breaths. It didn't make much of a difference.

She opened her eyes and found that straining them didn't help; the pantry was absolutely pitch black. There was no light coming through at all, not even a speck to see by. The heavy door must have been airtight - who'd deadbolt a pantry otherwise? - so there was probably a limited amount of breathable air. She had that matchbox in her pocket but… if she was running out of air, she probably shouldn't light any matches, right? On top of it all, the place smelled absolutely rancid, like meat that was left out in the sun.

Claire wiped her hands on her jeans as she stood. A wave of nausea hit her; she swayed, reaching out blindly. She found what felt like a shelf system to lean on, knocking over a few cans as she did. One of the cans hit her foot and she hissed in pain. She waited until most of the dizziness went away, clinging to the metal.

The first thing she tried was the door. Like she thought, the framing was airtight. There was nothing to pry apart; the hinges were on the other side where the deadbolt, or seal, was. Claire punched the door in frustration, leaving her with nothing but a sore fist.

The pantry itself was pretty big, as much as she could tell. There seemed to be plenty of food left; the crew probably left in the early days, without taking much with them, and it looked like no one thought to scavenge the ship since. She wondered if they were out at sea. If so, she hoped Castiel was up to flying them - they *were* going to escape, damn it - because she had no idea how they were going to sail this monstrosity otherwise.

She walking around slowly, keeping one hand stretched in front of her, the other using the shelf system for balance. Her foot hit something that let out a moan.

"Brian?" she whispered. "Are you alive?" Horrified, she wondered if Zanna could turn.

“Claire?” His voice was weak.

She crouched next to him, keeping a hand on a shelf for balance. “Yeah, I’m here.”

“How did you…?” His words were cut off by a violent coughing fit. He struggled for breath, spittle flying.

Claire grimaced. In spite of her fear (really, what harm would *one* little match be?) she took out the matchbox. The little light wasn’t a big help; she needed to hold it very close to Brian’s face to see how injured he was. It was pretty bad; his face was drawn and bruised, blood dripping from his mouth and down his chin. He managed to stop coughing and even tried to smile at her reassuringly.

The match burned out. She lit another, this time moving it down his body. He was slumped against one of the shelves, legs sprawled in front of him. There was a long, silver knife protruding from his chest, close to his heart… if he even had one. Who the hell knew, she thought. He seemed close enough to human to bleed, at the very least. The second match died; she didn’t put it away fast enough and it singed her fingers. She hissed, shaking her hand.

“You… got out,” Brian managed to choke out. “Claire I’m… I’m so… I’m so sorry. I thought he was… like me, I was only trying to-” he groaned in pain, “trying to help you.”

Tentatively, she put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. His hand closed around her forearm, clinging to it. “Brian, it’s okay,” she said, even if it really wasn’t. “If he’s not like you then what is he? How can we beat him?”

“ *Tlaloc* ,” Brian spat. “He said his real name is-” pausing again to catch his breath, he continued, “his kind… eats. Needs sacrifices. I didn’t know. *I didn’t know* ,” he insisted. He then pulled her hand from his shoulder to his chest, where the long knife was sticking out. Claire recoiled but Brian held on. “Take it,” he said.

“No,” she said, horrified. He didn’t let her pull her hand away. “It’s stemming the wound. You’ll bleed out.”

He shuddered. “I’m already...dead. *Claire* , listen. You need to be very b-brave now.” His teeth started chattering. He was fighting for every word. “When he c-comes b-back, use it.” He let go of her arm to close both hands on the knife handle, crying out in pain when he started to pull. She put her hands on top of his and didn’t know whether to help him or to stop him.

Eventually, Brian had to pause to gather his strength, gasping in pain all the while. “Kill him,” he finally said. “Then go d-down… down the ship… find a man b-bound. This-” he pulled a little more on the knife and Claire cried out on his behalf, “ *His* . He’ll...help you.”

“Castiel?” she asked in a trembling voice. She didn’t know when she started crying.

“You know…?”

Claire let out a small, wet laugh. “We’ve met.”

She felt Brian tense up and suddenly he really was pulling with all his strength, yelling out in pain and determination. The knife didn’t budge. Shuddering, Claire began to pull as well. The knife had caught on a rib. It took several moments for it to pop out with a sickening sound, gushing blood down her hands. She fell back from her crouch and scrambled away, bloody hands clutched tightly around the knife. It was absurdly sharp; she had cut herself a little by accident.

“Brian?” she half-whispered. “ *Brian* ?” She still couldn’t see a damn thing. She felt torn between wanting to help and wanting to flee. Of course, there was nowhere to go.

“S-sorry,” he finally gasped out. “ *So sorry* .” Brian took another long, rattling breath and then fell silent. She called his name a few times, but there was no reply. Trembling, Claire crawled closer. She reached out to check for a pulse. Her hand landed on his slack face at first and then slid down to his neck. He was dead.

Claire let out a sob. It was ridiculous, she came out here to *kill him* . Tricked or not, Brian was still part of the reason so many of them had died, and yet... with the exception of Cas, he'd been the only fixture in her life for the past year. He'd always been so kind to her and she knew, at last, that his kindness wasn't faked. Steeling herself, she felt Brian's face again and then positioned the long knife. It slid easily through his eye, destroying whatever chance he had of coming back as a ghoul.

She heard the door seal being released. Climbing to her feet unsteadily, she clutched the blade close to her chest, turning her back to the door. The sudden light would blind her, she knew, and it didn't make sense to attack Crocs - Tlaloc, was it? - like she had before. He would see it coming this time. No, better make Tlaloc come to her.

For the first time in a long time, she prayed to Castiel, like she had when she'd been strapped to that table all those months ago. Like she prayed when she was just a little girl, begging him to let her father come home. *Please, please let your knife be enough to kill him.*

The heavy door was pulled open.

" *Claire* ?" Enid, it was *Enid* . Claire turned around, half blind, and threw herself at her friend. Enid reeled from the impact but hugged back just as fiercely.

" *How did you know I was in here* ?" Claire cried out.

Enid pulled back, looking at her critically. "Oh God, you look awful," she said. "I woke up in one of the bedrooms upstairs. I found Oliver too but I couldn't wake him up. I came down here to look for you. Then I saw a guy coming out of this room and he was kind of talking to himself, so I hid. Claire, *there was an axe stuck in his chest* ." Enid stared at her, wide-eyed.

Claire let out a laugh. "Yeah, that was me," she said. "It didn't work out but this," she showed Enid the long silver blade, "this should do the job. I mean, that's what…" she stepped back so Enid could look inside the pantry and see Brian's body.

Enid's eyes widened. "Is that...?"

"Yeah, but listen, that other guy, Tlaloc, he's some kind of creature. Enid, he's been *eating* us. I think Heaven was just a place to, um, store us between feedings. Like a-" she looked around, "well, like a pantry, I guess? He said he couldn't eat me yet cause he's *full* ."

"...Susan?" Enid asked softly.

Claire could only nod, not trusting her own voice. She inhaled sharply. "He's strong. Really strong, Enid, but we *can* catch him by surprise..."

A short time later found Claire locked inside the pantry again. This time she was facing the door, Castiel's knife tucked in her waistband behind her back. She wasn't standing around in the dark anymore. She and Enid found a few candles in the kitchen and had scattered them around the pantry.

Claire wasn't worried about running out of air anymore. Enid had looked at her in amusement when Claire raised that particular concern. She explained that no, a few lit candles really *couldn't* eat away Claire's oxygen supply. It would literally take days for a room this size, even if it was airtight, and the candles themselves would actually die out of oxygen starvation long before Claire herself needed to worry. Apparently, Enid's parents had been scientists of some kind; her family's dinnertime conversations were just that side of weird. Who knew?

A forever later, the telltale sound of the door unsealing came. Claire practiced her meek, resigned face.

"Did you enjoy your time out?" Tlaloc asked. He had pulled the axe out of his chest at some point, leaving behind an ugly hole. His voice sounded smug like before but Claire thought she heard a touch of anger in his voice. "So! I did the rounds, *as usual* , and it took *forever* , also as usual. Still got no idea why the stupid Zanna insisted on giving you kids *space* , it's not like you *needed* it. How is Brian, by the way? Oooh, sorry. Too soon?" His eyebrows wiggled at her like he just told a great joke.

He gave a little huff of annoyance when she didn't respond. " *Anyway* , as it turns out, not all of my things are where I left them." He took a step toward her, looming despite being the same height as she was. It might have been a trick of the light, but his face seemed a little blue. Literally blue. "Care to tell me where the other one went?" he murmured.

"Right behind you," said Enid, coming out of her hiding place. Tlaloc turned dramatically, just in time for the flying projectile to hit him in the face and *explode* .

Like Claire, Enid had been taken in her normal clothes instead of in pajamas, even if unlike Claire she'd been taken in her sleep. For some reason Enid had a few green balloons in the zip pockets of her hoodie. She explained away her lack of sleep clothes by wanting to always be prepared - what if they were attacked at night? - but she didn't really explain why she was carrying *balloons* around of all things.

"You little…!" Tlaloc started to say but Enid managed to hit him in the face with another water balloon.

Claire took advantage of his confused state by thrusting Castiel's knife into his back. Tlaloc's whole body went rigid and she spent another second literally twisting the knife. He screeched, arms flailing. She dodged out of the way, ducking under his arm, running out of the pantry and into the kitchen to stand next to Enid, putting the kitchen island between them and Tlaloc.

"Eek!" Tlaloc squealed, he took a few unsteady steps into the kitchen. He tried to use his short, chubby arms to pull the knife out of his back, but he couldn't quite reach. "I… what, you idiot girl, what did you do?" He threw a confused look back at the pantry, where Brian's body was. Claire could tell the moment he figured it out. He moaned, "no… that was the *angel's blade* ?!"

What followed was the weirdest chasing game Claire ever played. Tlaloc was far too slow now. He tried to go around the kitchen island toward them, but when he went right, they went right too, and when he went left, they did the same.

" *Stop moving* !" he demanded shrilly. His face seemed to be blubbering a little under the surface. He fell forward, elbows catching the kitchen island. "No, no," he muttered around the water that was leaking out of his mouth. His eyes started to bulge like a giant hand was

squeezing him around the middle. Tlaloc's skin was becoming gummy and pale blue. He looked like he was going to burst.

"Um… I think we should duck," Claire said, pulling the wide-eyed Enid down to the ground. Just in time: they heard a ripping, squelching sound, a little bit like a balloon bursting but *bigger* . Water exploded over the entire kitchen. The counter protected them somewhat but their pant legs became drenched from the water splashing on the floor. Bits of… flesh, she supposed, hit the walls like the pieces of a burst balloon rubber. They heard the knife hitting the floor with a clanking sound.

Enid and Claire stood up slowly. They stared at what was left of Tlaloc's body: a tiny mess of bluish goo.

"*Gross*," they said in unison.

Chapter End Notes

This marks the end of the first half of the story :) Well, I say half, I originally intended to wrap up this particular portion in six chapters. I thought it was important for the kids to essentially rescue themselves, with Claire as the first abduction victim landing the final blow.

Tlaloc, by the way, was a real Aztec deity. He was associated greatly with water elements and by extension, supplementing life, being known as a "provider" of sorts. He was also greatly feared. human sacrifice, particularly of infants and young children, was an important part of the worship rituals. I based Tlaloc's childish, changeable personality on a couple of things. First of all, the age-old saying "you are what you eat". Secondly, his historical representation and association with water and with the weather: they can be calm and pleasant, but also volatile and unexpectedly dangerous.

...Basically, I googled a deity who hasn't shown up yet in SPN continuity, someone who is associated with human sacrifices, and who I could do a reasonable bait-and-switch for a Zanna.

Speaking of the Zanna - poor Brian really did just want to help. In the SPN episode introducing them, it was described that each Zanna had a "thing": his was being a Dad with a capital D. I picture him looking and acting a little like Phil Dunphy from Modern Family ;) In my mind he is drawn to kids who have difficult relationships with their fathers (which would be almost everyone).

He was drawn to Alexandria by Judith. She's described in the first chapter by Rick as a babbling toddler, like she was talking to an imaginary friend, only that she seemed too young for it - he was wrong of course: Judith is advanced for her age ;) I suppose that with all that running around that Rick does, Judith just misses her dad a lot. Both in the comics and in the show Rick has a bit of a disappearing act: he often goes on missions, knowing he might not come back, or just goes on supply runs other people could reasonably handle on their own.

If you recall, the Zanna only showed up in a standalone Supernatural episode (11.08 Just My Imagination). I really liked the fact that they were shown to really be benevolent - creatures whose purpose is just to help children. Romanian folklore actually portrays them as guardian angels of sorts. I thought to myself: what would a creature like that do in the middle of the zombie apocalypse? They are not very powerful, after all. I imagine many Zanna died fighting zombies during the initial outbreak.

Next up, the second half of the story: Cas and his merry band of kids :)

# Rock the Boat

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Enid picked up the long silver knife; the disgusted look on her face nearly sent Claire into a fit of giggles. The knife was dripping with that watery substance that Tlaloc had exploded all over the kitchen. Enid wiped it clean with a rag and then handed it back to Claire.

"You know, I've seen plenty of real gore." Enid studied a clump of blue gooey flesh that had landed on the counter. She then gestured down to her wet socks, wriggling her toes for emphasis. "Is it weird that this is grossing me out more?"

Claire snorted. "Ask me again next time we see somebody's hanging guts." She considered the blade for a few moments before pushing it through one of her jeans' belt loops. It didn't have a handle, but it was just thick enough to stay put. "Well? What do you think?" Claire struck a superhero pose, jutting her chest and putting her closed fists on her hips. Distractedly, she blew at the clump of blood-matted hair that fell in her eyes.

Enid burst into laughter. "You're a mess."

"A hot mess." Claire grinned despite her split lip. "Come on, let's go see if anybody's up yet."

Carl was the closest one to them. Claire pointed out the cabin ("cabins, not bedrooms, Enid") with the scribbled lopsided X on the door. They found him still knocked out in that unnatural sleeping pose, which quickly put a damper on their post-victory high. Somehow, they both assumed that killing that demon (or whatever he was) would break the spell (or whatever that was), waking everyone up from their shared dream (or whatever it was). Obviously, what worked in stories didn't really work out in real life.

"What happened to his face?" Claire asked after a moment of silence.

"My ex-boyfriend shot his eye out."

“...Wow.” With her normal degree of tact, she added, “was he the jealous type?”

“Shut up. It wasn’t like that. Ron was aiming at Carl’s *dad* .” At Claire’s side-eye she shook her head. “...It’s a long story.” Enid sighed. “We didn’t think he was ever going to wake up. But he did. Carl’s got a way of surprising people.” Enid looked like she wanted to say something else, but thought better of it. She sat down on the bed, taking his limp hand in hers.

“Hey,” Claire hip-checked her. “Plan A, remember? We still need to find Cas. He’ll know what to do.”

They headed for the stairs, stopping to grab a couple of flashlights from a utility closet. The ship had a lot of floors; climbing back up was going to be a bitch, Claire thought. Like before, she noticed that the lower they got, the brighter it seemed. They switched off their flashlights eventually. Finally, they reached the Under Deck, a long narrow corridor that eventually opened up into a great hall. It seemed that they’ve only been traveling along one side of the great vessel.

“This ship is *huge* ,” Enid breathed in genuine awe. “It’s like… the Super Star Destroyer Executor.”

“I have no idea what you just said.” Claire rolled her eyes at Enid’s offended face. “I think it’s one of those ships that haul containers around.”

Size notwithstanding, it was pretty cramped; most of the space was occupied by large machines and a complex system of walkways, and those were fairly narrow as well. Very often they found themselves doubling back, having arrived at a dead-end. The machines themselves looked dormant and dusty, although from time to time a few moving parts would surge into life as if they’ve received an unexpected surge of power.

A strange vibration seemed to permeate the air.

Claire had a sudden thought. She stopped, both hands on a safety rail, and turned to Enid. “This is gonna sound really strange,” she said, “but don’t you think that rumble is… kind of familiar?”

“What rumble?”

“You can’t feel that?” Claire asked, surprised. Enid shrugged, shaking her head no.

Claire found she didn’t have the right words to explain. That vibration was calling out to her somehow, and in some strange way… a part of her seemed to call back, or resonate, in response. Claire had already figured out that Enid was like her, like Jimmy had been. What did Castiel whisper to her all those years ago? *Special* . But unlike her, Enid had never been possessed by an angel.

Claire closed her eyes, focusing on that tiny thread inside of her. Trusting her instincts, she followed that lead. “I think I know where to go now,” Claire said. The thread led them to a steel bulkhead door that looked like it was taken out of a submarine, complete with a wheel operated deadlock. There were signs on the door, most of them too faded to read, except for the words DANGER and DO NOT OPEN in great, big, red fonts.

They exchanged nervous glances. “I really hope the ship’s not powered by nukes,” Enid said.

“Wait, that’s possible?” Claire blanched. She knocked on the door, calling out, “Cas! Are you in there?”

“Hey Claire, look.” There was a utility closet nearby, labeled “Safety Equipment”. Enid pulled out a couple of heavy looking suits. More stuff spilled out to the floor: heavy looking gloves, safety goggles, and even S&M-esque protective masks. “You think this can help?”

It took a few minutes to figure out how to put all the stuff on and a few minutes more to *actually* put it on. The equipment wasn’t really their sizes; Claire felt awkward and clumsy. The mask was too heavy on her injured scalp and also made it difficult to see. Still, as a precaution, it seemed more than enough.

It took their combined strength to unlock the door. Finally, with a hiss, it opened. And then... there was light.

Enid screamed. Claire pulled her back into the relative safety of the hall then pushed forward herself. The light was so strong, in spite of the welding mask she was wearing. The chamber itself looked like it was taken out of horror movie; the ground and walls were covered in strange red markings and chains crisscrossed the space like spiderwebs. In the middle stood a man-shaped pillar of light.

“Cas!” she called out, one hand raised protectively in front of her face.

The feeling, the vibration that resonated in her, twinged a little. Through her stretched fingers, she thought she saw him move. “Claire,” he grunted. “Seal… on the ground.”

At first she tried to scratch the paint off with her boot. It didn’t seem to work. Looking around frantically for anything that might help her, she spied a little tin paint bucket by the door. The lid was crusted shut. Her heavy-duty gloves were getting in the way, so she shook them off and tried again, prying the lid open with her nails and nearly ripping them out in the struggle. Finally, the lid came away.

Claire threw the bucket’s contents on the ground. She slipped, partly because of the momentum, but mostly because of the mask (she did *not* see that chain in front of her face). Thankfully, the mask absorbed most of the impact. She landed on her backside right on top of the wet paint puddle.

The light didn’t go out in a blast like she expected. Instead, it seemed to hum and slowly pull back - back into Castiel. He glowed for a long moment… and then everything went dark. It took a few seconds for her to realize that it wasn’t just a change in the brightness’ settings: the ship itself had gone dark.

Using the wall for support, she climbed to her feet, grimacing at the feeling of the wet paint on the back of her jeans. She took off her mask and dropped it at her feet before taking an uncertain step forward, hands raised in front of her.

“Cas?” she whispered. “Castiel, can you hear me?”

With a hum, the ship’s lights turned back on, dimmer than before. It looked like Castiel had been the one supplying power to the ship; maybe it was a bleeding effect of some kind. Now that he stopped, she realized that the ship’s emergency systems had engaged. Yellow lights flashed on and off at the hall outside. An alarm had activated somewhere on the ship; she really hoped it wasn’t the (maybe) nuclear reactor.

A beam of light appeared in Claire’s light of sight. Enid was standing in the doorway, mask removed, shining her flashlight at Castiel.

Enid gasped. “Are those *wings ?”*

Somehow in all the action, Claire had missed the enormous white wings coming out of Castiel’s back. Although, in all fairness, a moment ago it quite literally hurt to look at him.

Castiel himself didn’t look so hot; he was dirty and his clothes were in tatters. He stood at the center of the room, perfectly still, but not by choice. The collar around his neck was hooked to four different chains and those were pulled taut, leading up to different corners of the room. His arms and feet were cuffed, although their chains ended up in metal hooks on the ground, just between the markings. Feathers littered the floor at his feet, and the great wings were bound as well: cuffed at the joints and linked to chains that forced them to spread wide and high.

The chains clanked. Claire looked over and saw that Enid was pulling at a big knot of them. With a jolt, Claire realized those chains weren’t just bolted to single hooks - they all went through *multiple* hooks and accumulated at a single point at the far wall, where they had been tied together. Luckily, there wasn’t a lock; the chains were simply wrapped around one large hook. Together, they managed to untangle them.

“Look out,” Claire called out to Castiel belatedly.

She and Enid had to jump out of the way when the chains suddenly lost their anchor. They swung about violently, gravity taking hold. Castiel didn't stagger from the backlash. He tucked his wings against his back but otherwise did not move at all.

"Cas?" Claire asked, stepping forward. With a trembling hand, she reached out to touch his arm. "Are you okay?"

At last, Castiel's painfully familiar eyes focused. "Hello Claire." His head tilted. "You're hurt."

Without thinking, Claire threw her arms around him. She felt him flinch, more startled by her than he was by the sudden weight of all those chains. She sobbed against his chest, the weight of that entire year unexpectedly heavy in her mind. After a moment, he wrapped his own arms around her, uncertainly. She felt something incredibly soft at her back. His wings, she realized, and only cried harder.

Chapter End Notes

It's canon that angels leave behind a piece of their grace when they leave a vessel. I always thought that's so interesting.

Speaking of vessels, the ship is definitely not nuclear powered. There's only one cargo ship that runs on nuclear propulsion in the world today, and it's not a mega class like this one is.

What do you guys think of the story so far? I'm anxiously awaiting feedback, as always!

# Angel Freight

Claire cried for what felt like hours; she couldn't stop. When she finally ran out of tears, she found herself unable to let go of Castiel, suddenly terrified that if she looked up, she would start hating him all over again.

It had been easier in Heaven, that strange dream world they've spent the past year in. There, his voice was soundless, a frequency she'd somehow understood. Here, his voice was a distorted version of her father's. There, he was bodiless. Here… here he wasn't. And she couldn't bear the thought of hating him again, so she kept on clinging to him.

"Claire." The worry in his voice was unmistakable. "What can I do?"

A laugh bubbled out of her. Finally, she found the strength to push away, batting away at the wings he most certainly did not have the last time she saw him. She looked up and felt relief washing away her fear. Maybe it was the fact that she'd spent a year with Jimmy's ghost. Maybe it was the sight of those incredulous wings. Maybe she was just a heartless bitch. Whatever it was, she could look up at him and smile, and after all they've been through, that was enough.

"I'm okay," she said, feeling a little wobbly. "Sorry I leaked snot all over you."

"It's fine," he said so earnestly she couldn't help but giggle. Then he turned to look at Enid, who'd been hugging the wall with her back throughout Claire's little breakdown. "Hello again," he said in his gravelly voice.

Enid simply stated, "you've got wings."

His brow furrowed in confusion. "Yes, I know."

"You're an angel. A real one this time?" To Castiel's bemused nod she eloquently added, "holy crap." Enid took a few steps closer, unaware that she had grabbed Claire's arm and was

clutching it tightly. She opened her mouth a few times, looking like she couldn't decide what to ask first. Finally, she settled on "can you fly?"

Castiel winced. "Normally, yes." He folded the wings closer to his back, the feathers ruffling a little before falling flat. "Now…" He looked down at discarded feathers on the floor. They'd been carelessly stomped on, some of them nearly unrecognizable, stained red by the paint.

He continued, "They must look so very poor. They've never been clipped like this before. Normally I would put them away but…" he opened one of the wings, bringing it over his shoulder. They saw that there were metal cuffs wrapped around the appendage itself, creating ugly gaps between the feathers. "Do you see the etchings? They have to be painted over…" Castiel grimaced. "I'm afraid I still can't move from this spot."

"I'll do it," volunteered Enid, already pulling her sleeve over her hand and dipping it into the paint puddle on the floor. She then cautiously approached Castiel, who helpfully drew both of his wings over his shoulders, bringing the cuffs in Enid's reach. "Um, should I just cover the whole thing?"

He shook his head. "Just enough to break the flow of the design. The chains as well, if you don't mind."

Enid painted over the four cuffs around Castiel's wings, being very careful not to drip any paint directly on the feathers. She then proceeded down the length of the attached chains, replenishing from the paint puddle every so often. Claire helped by holding up the chains for her to work through and then tossing each length of chain aside once Castiel snapped it off.

"We weren't *really* in Heaven, were we?" Enid asked, only slightly awestruck by that point.

"In a manner of speaking," Castiel said, helpfully tilting his head so Enid could reach the runes on his collar. "I *am* a celestial being of heavenly intent; my own grace was used to create a dimension similar in physical properties to a single personified heaven. Admittedly, it was - *is* - a poor version of it. I'm sorry," he added, as an aside, "I did my best to create a stable environment for you, but the flow of energy was corrupted from the start. The seals Claire destroyed are absolutely abominable; they haven't been used since Lucifer's rebellion."

“Satan’s real, too?” Enid blurted, accidentally brushing her paint-dripping sleeve on Castiel’s chin. “Was that...?” She took a step back and pointed a finger toward the higher decks, where their fight with Tlaloc took place. Castiel squinted at the ceiling searchingly.

“Was he the guy we just killed?” she clarified.

“No way, he was just a demon, right Cas?” Claire said, holding up the next length of chain to be painted over.

“Tlaloc? You killed him?” Castiel seemed oddly proud. “No, he was a god, not a demon.”

“We killed God?!” Claire and Enid cried in unison.

“No, just *a* god,” Cas stressed. “Aztec, to be precise. There have been many gods throughout human history. Mankind is very unique among my Father’s Creation. With shared belief, Humanity managed to create *all sorts* of creatures over time. Your souls are remarkably powerful.” Puzzled, he added, “I’ve always wondered about that. It’s quite odd, actually. Why breathe life into a being and then worship it in turn?” He looked at them expectantly.

“Um,” Claire said intelligently. She exchanged a look with Enid. “I don’t... um. I don’t think I’m qualified to answer that question.” He seemed disappointed, so she cheered him up by holding another chain for him to snap.

All three were spattered with red paint by the time Castiel was set free. With a relieved sigh, he shook his wings out. “Thank you, both of you.”

Then, something strange happened: there was a crack of thunder, loud like the lightning had struck the ship itself. The smell of something burnt filled the room. Claire and Enid screamed, scrambling back. Castiel himself gave a pained cry, falling to his knees. His wings had disappeared.

“Cas?” Claire cried, falling down on her knees beside him. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“I didn’t expect that to happen.” He groaned, eyes squeezed shut. “I’m sorry. The seals you’ve destroyed forced me to absorb a lot of power. Ugh, quite… quite a lot, over a long period of time.” He opened his eyes, looking at her gratefully. “It was very good of you to release me when you did. I’m not sure my grace would have stayed intact for much longer.”

“I saw that light go back into you,” Claire said uncertainly. “If it’s too much, why don’t you just release it?” He was shaking his head before she finished her sentence.

Castiel said, “a discharge like that would be catastrophic. And Claire, I’m *so very sorry*,” he looked at her sadly, “I can’t heal your injuries. Healing requires a substantial amount of power and I, um, I don’t have the necessary dexterity for it at the moment. I could burn you from the inside out.”

“Oh Cas, don’t worry about it, it’s not so bad.” She tugged on his arm. Enid took his other side, and together they pulled him back to his feet, bracing him as he swayed. “Just, no more freaky light powers until we figure out how to fix you,” Claire added. “Will you be okay, though? You’re not gonna explode or something?”

He grimaced. “The Grigori were said to have used this method before, to overpower themselves with the intent of launching suicide attacks in battle.” At their alarmed looks he added, “but my grace should recover eventually. I might be able to release some of the stored energy, perhaps a little every time.” He sighed. “Tlaloc was an idiot.”

“A real jerk, too,” Enid added.

Claire then asked, “we broke the spell, though, right Cas? Will Carl and the rest wake up now?”

“Wake up?” Castiel looked at her strangely. “But they aren’t asleep.”

Enid asked, “you can hear them from all the way down here?”

Still looking confused, Castiel answered, “Of course I can, they’re right here. And they are *very* loud.”

“They’re… what?” Enid said.

Castiel frowned. ”They are *here*, in me. Wasn’t… wasn’t that obvious?” He gave an exasperated sigh. “I’ve been trying to expel them ever since you’ve unchained me. They’re being quite stubborn. It’s good that Tlaloc put their bodies in stasis. Bodies without souls are *very* unpleasant. Don’t worry, once their souls are safely inside their physical forms they should be fine.” A concentrated look passed over his face. “Almost got it…”

“Heaven… is you?” Claire breathed, pulling away to point at him accusingly. “We’ve been *inside of you* this whole time?

“Um, yes? Didn’t I explain earlier?”

Enid wondered, “Where’d we even *fit* ?”

“I’m very large,” Castiel told her honestly.

“Enid, *shut up,*” Claire yelled when the other girl started to laugh.

“This is so wonderfully weird,” Enid giggled.

“How is that weird?” Castiel asked, head tilted.

Claire glared at him. She knew exactly how ridiculous she sounded when she asked, “why didn’t you let me have that motorcycle?”

“It’s a very dangerous form of transportation, Claire.”

“I couldn’t even get a papercut in there! And, and… what about the thing with the hairdryer? You didn’t let me have a hairdryer.”

Sheepishly, he said, “I thought it was a weapon.”

“A *hairdryer*, Cas. It’s literally in the name.”

“The shape is misleading. Also, I assumed the name was a pun.”

“That doesn’t even make any sense!” she cried out.

“I’ve noticed that humans are very fond of ironic namings. Did you know there is a type of rifle called Winchester?” Before she could reply, an odd look crossed his features. “Oh, I think I’ve got it now. You two might want to take a step back. Um, another one, please. One more, thank you. Yes, that’s far enough.”

Castiel took a deep breath. He held it for a second, eyes closed in deep concentration. Then, he threw his head back, and with the exhale, bright light poured out of his mouth. The light was no less pure than before, yet somehow more bearable to look at, with an almost earthy feeling to it. It broke into separate beams before ascending through the ceiling, disappearing as quickly as it had appeared.

“*So weird*,” Enid said again.

# Jersey Shore

Carl inhaled deeply, savoring the smell of the ocean air.

The dull headache that woke him up should've been his first clue. Instead, he'd reached up to rub away at (what he thought were) crusted eyelashes, and ended up poking his exposed eye socket through the bandage. *That* pain got him stumbling out of bed in no time, all too aware that he wasn't in Heaven anymore.

A few hours later, he was standing on top of an enormous cargo ship, smelling seaweed and tasting salt on his lips.

The ship was docked at the end of a remarkably long pier, several miles off-shore. Carl was no expert, but even he could tell that it was a sloppy park job: a few containers had fallen from the main deck down to the pier, whose surface was tilted slightly, crushed under the weight of the massive vessel. There were walkers below them but they were still oblivious to their presence. The deck was too high and walkers, as a general rule, didn't look up.

They seemed to be of the "lurkers" variety, the kind that didn't roam randomly but was, for some reason, content to stand or lay around until something caught their attention. None of them looked particularly fresh; Carl wondered how long it had been for them, if they'd been standing around like that for months, or even years.

"I forgot how ugly they are." He heard Claire muttering from where she stood next to him, binoculars lifted to her face. She was looking at the long concrete road that led to the shore. "I count forty ghouls till the beach, including the ten directly below us. Most of them are spread pretty thin."

"I'm more worried about what comes after," Carl replied, pointing toward a wooded area beyond the shore.

"Can't tell, it's too dense." She put down the binoculars, holding them loosely in one hand. Sounding affronted, she added, "I still can't believe we're in *New Jersey*."

Carl snickered. "Cause everything else makes total sense, right?" he tapped her on the shoulder. "C'mon, let's go back inside, I heard there's an angel who might need our help counting soup cans."

Needless to say, Carl was having a strange morning.

Earlier, while they were regrouping (and Carl spent some time panicking before they managed to find Judith in the Captain's cabin, looking cuddly and sleepy and no worse for wear), Enid and Claire introduced the rest of their group to Castiel...who turned out to be a real person after all, one who had been held prison alongside them.

Also, Castiel was an angel. A real one. The girls were very insistent on that. Apparently, there'd been wings.

The man himself kept mostly quiet, looking slightly confused and a bit uncomfortable as the girls constantly interrupted one another recounting their experiences. The oddest thing was how easily Carl believed them. And by the look on the others' faces, they did too. The younger kids nodded sagely at the explanations, where Jake, Scott and Mikey just seemed awed and speechless (Carl looked like that too, he realized).

It wasn't that Castiel *looked* like an angel (however Carl pictured angels looking like). He was scruffy and tired-looking, and his clothes were full of holes (particularly at the back, because, maybe, possibly, wings?) No, it was just that, looking closely, there seemed to be something otherworldly about him.

Maybe it was the way he seemed *familiar*, even when Carl was sure he'd never seen him before. It might have been that his blue eyes didn't seem to blink as often as they should, or that he spoke so matter-of-factly about the supernatural creatures who'd kidnapped them with the intention of "eating their souls" (and Carl very definitely did not allow himself to think about Susan).

Maybe it was the way he'd ripped a locked solid iron gate off its hinges with his bare hands. Point was, Carl was adaptable.

Come noon, they'd turned the ship's navigation bridge into their temporary headquarters. It was a nice open space with plenty of windows and lots of colorful buttons that the younger kids had to constantly be reminded not to press. They spent some time looking for supplies, taking advantage of the ship's remaining backup power, and managed to find plenty of it, too.

Everything they've managed to scavenge from the lower decks was piled up at one corner: preserved food, water, spare clothing (although they couldn't find any that fit the younger kids), backpacks, toiletries and so on. They managed to scrounge up a few weapons as well: knives from the kitchen, a couple of axes and a crowbar that Jake instantly adopted. Mikey had appointed himself as their quartermaster, making lists of everything they had and everything they needed to look for on the outside.

Briefly, they discussed the idea of going through the water. Sadly, there were no ships around beside the enormous vessel (which they couldn't even begin to figure out how to sail) and the water seemed to be littered with debris and sad looking shipwrecks belonging to people who had had similar ideas in the past. Not to mention, as Carl reminded them, walkers *floated*. So walking it was. Or driving, if they got lucky (Castiel had also informed them, very apologetically, that he would've tried flying them all home if his wings hadn't been damaged).

Castiel didn't look up when they entered the navigation bridge, but he nodded once when Claire made her report on the number and state of the walkers outside. There had been an awkward air to him earlier, Carl realized, an odd gentleness. Not anymore. Now, Castiel looked razor-sharp in his focus, his expression grim.

He hadn't been counting soup cans. He and the rest of their little group (except for Judith and the other small children, who seemed to be playing an elaborate game of "throw the plastic cups as far as possible") were inspecting a large map, which they'd spread over a round bolted-down table. The bundle of maps was a lucky find; Castiel hadn't been able to tell them

the name of the state they were in, but one look outside was all he needed to point out their exact location on the map (Sandy Hold, NJ, now circled in red).

"That's us," Enid was saying, half climbing over the table in order to draw a red circle around Alexandria. She pointed to another red circle farther north, "the twins," she pointed to another circle, crossing over to Pennsylvania, "and that's Annabelle. So far, everybody's not *too* far away."

"The Zanna are not skilled teleporters," Castiel explained. "Even using borrowed power, traveling with companions is a massive energy drain."

"Looks like ours is the last stop," said Carl, studying at the innocent little circle around Alexandria. Across the table, Mikey let out a sardonic *yay*. Carl snorted, then asked, "what about Oliver and Daliah? Did you get something out of them?" Earlier, the two children had tried to explain in their own way (and in Daliah's case, her own language), but it was clear they didn't really know where their camps *were*.

Castiel shook his head, then added contemplatively, "I could take a look for myself."

"Cas!" Claire berated before the rest of them could ask what he meant, "you're supposed to *take it easy*."

"It is a *very* small thing. I won't have to tap into my reserves at all."

Once he explained to them what he was going to do and had their consent (Daliah looking afraid, Oliver mostly curious), he touched their foreheads, one after another. Daliah, the little foreign girl, turned out to have the closest camp, a hotel southwest of Sandy Hold that her entire extended family had lived in. Then he checked Oliver, and whatever he saw there seemed to make him angry. Castiel didn't say much except that Oliver wasn't going back to his original camp.

The little boy didn't seem very bothered by that. "I wanna go with Claire!" he declared, clinging to her waist.

"I've nowhere specific to get back to, actually. It was only me and my mom before, and you know, she's dead, so..." Claire reached down to pat Oliver's messy hair. "I'll take care of you, buddy." Then she asked, "Cas, what about you? Where do you want to go?"

"Oh, my family is looking for me," Castiel told them, "I will join them when you are all safely returned home."

"Your… angel family?" wondered Carl.

Castiel shook his head. "My human family. Sam," he said, then added with a soft smile, "and Dean." He looked at Claire, expression turning worried. "You've met them once before. Claire, I assumed that… what I mean is… " he sighed. "I promised your father that I would keep you safe."

"Don't talk about him," Claire said sharply, but she looked more sad than angry. After letting out a long breath, she added, "yes, I'll stick around. Both of us, okay?" She squeezed Oliver closer to her.

Castiel nodded.

"Then okay, Cas."

Jake, who didn't have much patience for other people's sob stories, cut the tension. "So, we drop Daliah off, cross the interstate into Pennsylvania for Anna, and then continue down south." He traced the general path along the map with his finger. "Problem is, where to cross the '95? It's totally blocked in both directions, not to mention the shit-ton of roamers we're going to find."

Castiel frowned down at the map again, sounding troubled. "They do tend to herd. It will be difficult to protect you if we come across large groups."

"Do you know what they are?" Carl suddenly asked, surprised at himself for not raising the question sooner. Walkers had been a fact of life for years.

Castiel's head tilted. "Animated corpses. Colloquially they are referred to as zombies, but…" he seemed puzzled. "I believe most don't like that term?"

Carl had to grin at that old debate. "We call them *walkers*."

"We used ghouls," supplied Claire.

"Zack," said Daliah softly, surprising Carl who didn't realize she could understand them.

"Thrillers," said Jake. Everyone turned to look at him. His brother particularly looked skeptical. "Fine, not really."

"Stop trying to make *thrillers* happen," Scott said, rolling his eyes. "It's just corny."

"Demons." That was Annabelle's shy voice.

"No," said Castiel, shaking his head. "This plague is not demonic in nature. Those," his head moved to indicate the outside, where the walkers roamed, "are just bodies fuelled by adrenaline and hunger…" he trailed off. Eventually, he added, "there's nothing inherently evil about them, they just are."

Carl insisted, "but where did they come from?"

"I don't know," Castiel replied simply. "I can see the spread of the disease in the air. In all of you. It carries no trace of Heaven nor Hell. And yet..." Castiel looked at them sadly, "it didn't come naturally." A long, somber silence followed his words.

Jake hooted suddenly, startling even Castiel. "I knew it! *Bioengineering*," he sneered, then slapped his scowling brother's back. "I won the bet, jerkface."

Castiel looked fondly at the brothers' antics. Then he said, "We should leave as soon as we can. I suppose that the safest option is to secure a vehicle. I'll see what I can find nearby."

"I'll come with you," Claire said immediately.

"No," Castiel replied.

"Do you even know how to jumpstart a car?" Claire countered. "Or how to drive one, for that matter?"

"I've seen it done," Castiel said earnestly.

"We should all come with you," said Enid. Jake and Scott nodded in agreement. Mikey just looked queasy.

"The plan is to *scout ahead*," Castiel argued.

"I'll go," Carl said. "Claire, you really should stay. You're injured, and you haven't fought walkers in months."

"*You're* injured, dumbass." Claire snapped.

"I've had time to heal and train. Your limp is a bigger problem than my eye."

Castiel sighed. "Enough. We have a long journey ahead, you'll have plenty of opportunities to prove yourselves. *One* of you may join me - the rest should stay behind to prepare for the road."

He then gave them a pleased smile. "Now, as to who - I've been informed that there is a *traditional* approach to solving such conflicts. Normally, it would take just two participants, but I believe you could take turns…"

A few rounds of Rock-Paper-Scissors later declared Carl as the winner.

# Wayfarer's Prayer

Carl picked up a meat carving knife from the weapon stash. It was nice and sturdy and about as long as his forearm. He took the time to use a sharpening rod on it, one more useful thing they've picked up in the ship's kitchens.

"I'll add sheaths to the list," said Mikey, handing Carl a length of fabric for a makeshift weapon holder. True to his word, he pulled out a small notepad from the back pocket of his oversized jeans.

"Careful, you're turning into Olivia." He meant it as a joke, but Mikey just shrugged without looking up from the notepad. Grimacing, Carl quickly wrapped the knife in the fabric and tied it to his belt, then picked up a second, smaller one to put in his boot, just in case.

On the other side of the navigation bridge, Castiel was waving away Claire's attempts to hand him a long, silver blade. "You keep it, it suits you." He flicked his wrist and another knife, identical to the one Claire was holding, dropped down from his sleeve to his hand. "I've made another one this morning."

*That's useful*, thought Carl, patting his makeshift knife-tie to make sure it was still holding.

"I thought you didn't like me handling weapons." Claire crossed her arms over her chest.

"I don't," Castiel said simply, the blade disappearing with a second flick of his wrist. "But now you need one."

They didn't waste much time before heading out. Getting down from the ship proved to be a small challenge: the mechanical gangways didn't work when the ship was out of power (having run out its emergency juice earlier that morning). Luckily, they discovered a failsafe in the form of rolled up ladders attached to the ship's rails.

Castiel went down the ladder first. He took care of five walkers before Carl's feet even hit the pier. He handled the remaining ones in the few seconds Carl needed to draw his knife. It *would* have been pretty cool, Carl admitted to himself, if Enid didn't happen to be watching from the upper deck. He heard the rest of the group cheering.

"Bring us back something nice!" Jake called down. Carl gave him the finger.

The pier was solid concrete beneath their feet. It was wider than Carl had thought when he'd been standing on the ship's deck. Along the pier, Carl could see that a few of the lurkers were stirring, turning dead eyes in their direction. Most of them were still pretty far, the sound of the waves drowning out their moans. Carl kept the knife in his hand. It would be pretty embarrassing if he came back with it still sparkling clean, he thought.

Castiel looked at the approaching walkers with narrowed eyes. "Stay behind me."

"Yeah, sure, I'll watch your six," Carl said under his breath, falling into step behind the angel.

"My six what?" Castiel glanced over his shoulder.

"...Nothing."

There was a warehouse at the end of the docking area, its rolling gate sealed shut with a rusting padlock. Castiel drove his blade through the skulls of two approaching walkers, then knocked twice on the warehouse gate, cocking his head as if to listen for an answering moan.

Castiel gave Carl a brisk nod. "There's only one inside. Be ready."

The padlock came apart easily in Castiel's hand. The warehouse had an open sea access on its other side and a bunch of loading equipment, but not much else besides. They found the walker at the back of the warehouse, a frail-looking thing in a ratty jumpsuit. It was handcuffed to something that looked a bit like a large radiator. Whoever the guy used to be, his death hadn't been easy - there were fingernail-shaped gouges on the ground, ending a couple of feet away from a set of discarded keys.

"D'you think he got bit?" Carl wondered.

The walker gave a rasping cry when it saw them, making grasping motions with its free hand. There was a sickening creak of breaking bones and then the walker lurched forward, suddenly free. It let out a long groan as it made its way to them, the palm of one hand hanging limply from its wrist.

In stark contrast to his earlier behavior, Castiel didn't make a move on the walker. Instead, he crossed his arms over his chest, weirdly looking a bit like Claire did when she had done the same earlier. He raised an expectant eyebrow at Carl.

Carl took one step toward the walker, sidestepped it before it could touch him, then drove his large knife through its fragile skull. It dropped lifelessly to Carl's feet. Carl turned to Castiel with what he hoped was blank expression, strutting his chin.

"Good," Castiel said with a nod. Then he asked, "do you smell gasoline?"

They found two gas jerrycans not far away from where the walker had been. Apparently, whoever left it behind managed to forget their fuel as well. Castiel sniffed at the jerrycans' contents, declaring that the gas was still good. They left the containers by the warehouse entrance, to be collected on the return trip.

"It's weird, though," Carl said a short time later as they made their way down to the shore. "I've got this friend, Eugene, he's the smartest guy I know. I mean, book smart." Carl tripped an approaching walker, then quickly stabbed it in the back of the head. "He told me that all the gas should've gone bad in, like, a year. But it's been what, four already?"

"It's a miracle," Castiel said.

"Right?" Carl gestured with his knife. "It's the weirdest thing."

"No, I mean that it is, quite literally, a miracle."

"Wait, what?"

Castiel said matter-of-factly. "It happened before. Well, not *exactly* like this, and not on this scale, of course." Castiel seemed surprised at Carl's befuddled expression. "You didn't realize? I thought Hanukkah was one of the more well-known Jewish holidays."

"Um, that's the one with the candles, right?"

Castiel brutally beheaded two walkers as he explained. "Well, the Israelites used oil. They were very upset to nearly run out of it, actually. Really, they were quite sad." He flickered his blade, which gleamed clean again, like the gore couldn't stick to it. "My brothers and I were very surprised when the little can of oil lasted for a full eight days. By then, God rarely answered any more prayers."

"So the gas lasts because of *God*?"

Castiel looked away. "I'd hoped…" he started to say, then shook his head. "Perhaps. It doesn't matter. Come on, we're nearly at the shore."

Between the walkers and the warehouse visit, it took them nearly an hour to clear the pier. They found a checkpoint of some sort, close to the end. A little Honda had been left there to rust. From the look of it, its tires had blown when someone tried to back it over the security rods on the ground.

"I don't think we can fix it up," Carl said after giving it a quick once-over under the hood. Newer car models were next to impossible to salvage.

"I want to try something. Shut your eyes," Castiel said and put a hand on Carl's arm, physically steering him away. Castiel placed two fingers on the car's battery, then glanced over his shoulder in order to repeat, "shut your eyes."

There was a flashbang behind Carl's closed eyelid. He heard a cry of pain from Castiel, and a loud crash. He opened his eye to find the car had been shoved with such force that it flew over the edge of the pier. It had crushed straight through the metal railings to land upside down in wet sand.

"What was *that*?" Carl turned to look at Castiel. The angel had fallen on his butt.

"That," said Castiel as he picked himself up, wearing a remarkably human expression of annoyed embarrassment, "stays between you and me."

A few walkers came shambling out of the woods, but not as many as they'd feared. The road that led away from the pier was mostly clear. They found the remains of another warehouse farther inland. Its roof had caved in, leaving a half raised structure behind.

"Hey, check it out," Carl said, pointing to a large white van.

The warehouse's parking lot was halfway full of old, rusting trucks. The white van stood apart. It had all the signs of a *recently* abandoned vehicle; its windshield hadn't yet collected

enough dust to completely hide its interior. Carl wondered if whoever left it tried to look for supplies inside the warehouse and never made it back out.

There were no walkers beyond the warehouse's fences, and none came crawling out of the ruins, so they made a beeline to the vehicle. It was a large courier van. An *old* one, he noticed, suddenly hopeful. Carl tried the driver's door, finding it empty and with the key still in the ignition. He tried it, and of course, it didn't work, but the gas gauge showed it was halfway full and there were no obvious blood stains on the upholstery, which he considered a good sign. He pulled on the lever to pop open the hood.

Castiel let out a huff. "It's… different," he admitted.

Carl grinned. "Okay, move over a bit."

They got lucky. The battery hadn't been completely dead. They managed to give the van a jump start, with Castiel pushing it around the large lot and Carl at the driver's seat, his foot pressed to the clutch.

"Yes!" Carl drummed both hands on the wheel when the van finally started.

They let it run while they poked around the rest of the warehouse's grounds, not finding anything more useful. The sun was setting down by the time they made their way back to the ship, Castiel in the driver's seat (he did know how to drive, it turned out). They didn't forget to collect the gas cans on the way. They heard their group's cheers as they parked.

"Just in time," grinned Enid when Carl made his way up the ladder, thrusting a smelly toddler into his arms. "Judith needs a diaper change. *Again*."

"Would've been great if we actually had any," Carl grumbled. He accepted the pieces of cloth Enid handed him instead.

"It's on the list," Mikey told him cheerfully.

To their great pleasure, the ship still had hot water. They knew it might be a long while before they'd enjoy a hot shower again. After, they made sure they had everything prepared for the journey. Mikey ended up being the one to help Castiel count the canned food, which they'd packed into two very large duffel bags.

"Hey Cas," Carl heard Claire say just before they were ready to clonk out. She was holding a trench coat in her hands, holding it up for Castiel to look at. It was dark blue, nearly black, and about knee length. "Found it with the captain's stuff. What do you think?"

Castiel, who had changed into clean clothes but was still wearing the torn-up tan trench coat he'd been wearing all day, seemed touched. He accepted the new coat, holding it up very carefully.

"You don't have to keep wearing dad's old coat, you know," Claire said. "Mom always hated that thing."

Castiel didn't seem to know what to say. He looked at Claire with a soft expression.

She waved him away. "Go! Put it on." She turned to Carl next, or actually, to Judith, who was sitting in his lap, cuddling up to him like she always did when she was sleepy. "And this is for you," she said and put a captain's cap on top of Judith's head. "Aww."

Judith, of course, pulled it off a second later. She kept holding on to it, though, even as she fell asleep, which earned her another heartfelt "aww" from Claire.

That night they carried blankets and pillows to the navigation bridge, settling down in one space like they did in Heaven. Castiel, they found, didn't need to sleep.

They loaded their supplies into the van early the next morning, managing to clear up more space for themselves in the back by securing the two large and canned-food-heavy duffel bags to the roof. It still wouldn't be the most comfortable of journeys: the backspace didn't have any seats or windows. They made up for it by loading it with blankets and pillows. Luckily, there was no partition between the front and the back of the van.

"I'm in charge of the maps," Jake explained from the passenger seat. "Also, I called shotgun."

"You did not," Scott grumbled, settling down at the back between the gas cans and a squirming Oliver. "Kiddo, settle down, we didn't even take off yet."

"Called it earlier, not my fault you weren't listening," Jake replied. He poked his head out of the window to ask, "hey, where's Cas?"

Carl, who was standing by the passenger door (he didn't manage to beat Jake's dash to the shotgun position), saw that Castiel was standing at the edge of the pier, eyes closed. He didn't have his hands clasped together or anything but Carl still had the impression that he was praying. A moment later, Castiel opened his eyes and walked back to the van, his new coat billowing behind him.

"Have a safe journey," Castiel said as he sat down in the driver's seat.

And then they were on their way.

# Bad Company

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was another clear and sunny day. Rick woke up to the sound of birds and to an empty bed.

Michonne, for once, had spent the night in Alexandria. Rick suspected that his exhausted face was the only reason she showed up at all, let alone stayed longer than the time it took for her to resupply. He usually managed to catch sight of her slipping out of the house, Carl's hat pulled low over her eyes. Rick never tried to stop her; he knew he couldn't, but he wanted to, desperately. Even the deafening silence between them was better than an empty house.

That morning, she'd taken the sniper rifle from the fireplace. She didn't look up at him when she walked out, the rifle hanging from her shoulder. She wouldn't be out looking for Carl and Judith today, Rick realized.

The Saviors' visit loomed over all of their heads. They've put aside half of their supplies; it wasn't a lot. The food they managed to acquire from the Hilltop community was already running low, and now they needed to tighten their rations even more.

As it turned out, the Saviors decided to show up for their so-called dues a full day early.

Rick was alerted about their incoming visitors by Aaron, who had been on watchtower duty. He didn't need to have bothered; they could all hear the rumble of the approaching vehicles. More than likely, walkers had been drawn to the sound too.

Negan himself was standing behind the gate. Rick was more than a little surprised; he hadn't gotten the impression that Negan often humbled himself to join the Saviors on their raids. The man greeted Rick with a friendly smile, dimples and all, but Rick remembered all too well how he'd beat both Abraham and Glenn to death wearing that same grin.

"Do not make me have to ask," Negan warned when Rick didn't immediately move to open the gate.

"You said a week," Rick said. "You're early." Nevertheless, Rick gritted his teeth and pulled the gate aside. It creaked heavily.

"I missed you," Negan offered as a way of explanation, eyes crinkling with an easy smile.

The walker that came stumbling from between the trucks was a laughable threat. It came straight at them, making that guttural noise that walkers made when they'd spotted food. Negan greeted it with the same enthusiasm as he'd greeted Rick earlier. He made sure Rick was watching when he bashed its head in with a single strike from his barbed bat, rendering it truly and finally dead.

"Did I just take care of one of those dead pricks that could've killed one of y'all?" Negan then proceeded to air out his grievances. Acting as if he had done them a great favor. As if they needed his so-called protection. His so-called *service*.

He handed Rick his bloodied bat and gestured for his people to move ahead with the process.

Reluctantly, Rick followed Negan into his community, his home, carrying Negan's bat around like a servant, barbs dripping walker-blood onto the sidewalk. The Saviors didn't waste any time invading people's space, demanding they empty their pockets and their homes. For all their cheap thuggish behavior, they were incredibly in sync with one another. And they completely ignored the neat piles of food Rick and his people had put aside for them.

"By the way," Negan said as he surveyed his people at work. "Any luck finding your kids?"

Rick felt a muscle in his jaw twitch. "No."

Negan grimaced sympathetically. "Yeah, same on our side." Rick didn't know what expression passed over his face then, but Negan didn't seem to like it. "Beg your fucking pardon, Rick. Is that skepticism I detect? *I told you*, the boys are keeping a lookout for your goddamn kids. My word is my fucking bond."

He stepped closer, enough that Rick could feel his breath. "Maybe we're not doing enough, Rick, is that it?"

A memory came to Rick's mind, unbidden. When Carl had been a young boy, he'd gotten into a fight with another boy at school. It was bad enough that the teacher had to pull them apart, and Rick and Lori were called in to meet with the principal. It didn't matter that the other boy had been picking on Carl for weeks (which Rick had only then realized, much to his shame), Carl had thrown the first punch, and he'd ended up suspended for two days as a result.

Later, Carl had asked Rick what he should've done instead. The other boy, whose name Rick couldn't recall, had been older and much larger than Carl had been back then. (Rick did remember that, as a deputy, he'd been called to the boy's house on several occasions due to "domestic disturbances"). Rick had put his hands on Carl's shoulders and told him that next time he should count to ten.

Years later, Rick tried to follow his own advice. The bat's weight was ever so tempting in his hand. It was not the counting, but the sound of Anna's, his elderly neighbor's, soft crying that finally prompted Rick to say, "no."

"No?"

"No, you're... doing enough," Rick gritted out, resolutely looking at his feet.

"Don't you mention it," Negan said with an *aw shucks* tone of voice, thumping Rick's shoulder. He finally took a step out of Rick's personal bubble. "How'd you manage to lose them anyway? What, they run away or something? You must feel like a piece of shit."

"No," Rick said hoarsely. "They didn't… they didn't run. My daughter is just two. We woke up one morning and they were gone."

"Did you notice any weird smells?" Negan asked after a long pause. Rick looked up to see Negan was staring at him with narrowed eyes.

"What?"

Negan gave him a hard, searching look. "Sulfur. Smells like rotten eggs." He seemed to consider Rick's confused expression as a *no*, because he went on to asking, "what about cold spots in the house? Any strange substances? Markings of any kind?"

Rick thought back to that awful day. "No… no. Nothing like that."

"Huh, how about that," Negan said mostly to himself. He ran a hand through his hair, seemingly lost in thought. Finally, he turned back to Rick, giving him an almost sheepish look. "Sorry, I'm drawing a blank." He grinned suddenly, all teeth. "Hey, you got any family photos?"

A short time later, Rick came out of his house holding a framed photograph of Carl and Judith. "It's recent," he said with a voice full of gravel. The polaroid was grainy and overexposed, but Carl was smiling even with the bandage on his face, and Rick, who had been off-frame pulling silly faces, managed to get Judith to smile too. Michonne snapped the photo just a few weeks past, a lifetime ago.

He couldn't bring himself to hand it over until Negan coughed, holding out a hand expectantly. Negan made a show of fumbling with the frame. It hit the ground, harder than it should have from such a simple drop, its glass shattering.

"Oh, how clumsy of me," Negan said with an exaggerated sigh. He pointed to his feet, all but leering. "Pick that up, Rick, would you?"

Rick went down on one knee, head bowed. He could feel the burning gazes of all the people around them, Saviors and Alexandrians alike, but couldn't bring himself to look back at them. He didn't realize his hands were shaking until he felt the sting of the glass shards and heard Negan's sharp bark that he'd better not get any of his blood on (the already bloodied) Lucille. He pulled the delicate photo from the frame and handed it over to Negan, climbing back up to his feet.

"Oh, would you look at this little angel," Negan cooed when he saw Judith. He turned the polaroid around so Rick could see too. As if Rick hadn't been staring at it every damn night. "Adorable," Negan said. Then he gestured for one of his men to approach. "Pass that around. I want everyone to get a good look at it." The grim-faced man nodded, taking the photograph.

"Don't," Rick called before he could stop himself.

Negan stepped into Rick's path before he could go after the guy. "Relax," he said with a grin. It reminded Rick of a shark. "Like I said, *service*. You'll get it back when we're done."

Negan stepped back with another good thump to Rick's shoulder, making a show of looking around. "Say, whatever happened to that sick girl?"

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter this time, sorry. I find it really difficult to weave around canon scenes. I have zero interest in repeating the actual scenes word for word, by the way. Except for the detailed divergences, you can imagine everything else taking place exactly as in canon.

By the way, the photograph is the one we've seen in ep 6.10. You can google it, it's really sweet.

# Livin' on a Prayer

Daliah's family had set up camp in a little hotel southwest from their original position. At least that was what Castiel saw in her mind. It was less than sixty miles from the ship, but it might as well have been six hundred. In a good day, they would have reached their destination in a matter of hours at the most. Unfortunately, they'd encountered a few setbacks that had stretched several hours into several days.

The worst setback was the herds. There were *a lot* of them, large and small. Even Castiel wasn't keen on fighting the dead in large numbers, and by Carl's reckoning, the guy could probably take down walkers in his sleep (if he ever slept, that is). They found out the hard way that it didn't matter how physically strong someone was: a large number of walkers could and *would* get past them.

Carl had to admit that they probably wouldn't have survived long without Cas, not in this environment. Their group wasn't the most battle-ready even if they didn't have the younger kids to worry about. Carl got by well enough and Jake was a six-foot *beast* with a crowbar, but that was about it. Claire was injured and out of practice, Mikey never had much to begin with and Enid had always survived through stealth and avoidance. Scott relied too much on his brother.

"I'm better with a gun," Scott had explained after seven consecutive strikes finally brought the walker down. In spite of his dark complexion, Scott visibly blushed.

"You won't always have a gun," Castiel told him frankly. He had watched Scott with the same critical once-over he'd given Carl in the warehouse. He killed off the last walker and then said, with a decisive nod, "you'll practice."

Apparently, that meant all of them. They had their first training session in a secluded little spot on top of a hill. Claire hummed the Mulan training song the entire time.

It was kind of fun, in Carl's opinion, even if none of them actually managed to land a hit on Castiel (in fairness to them, walkers were much slower). The class ended when the three younger kids rushed at Castiel, all at once, and managed to knock him down (in fairness to *him*, he probably let them). Judith then waddled over and plopped down on top of their human(ish) pile. That, along with Cas' bewildered expression, had set Carl laughing for a solid minute.

While they ate canned beans and vegetables (and Castiel didn't, because apparently, that was another thing he didn't do) they decided to try and hide from the approaching herds instead of running from them. Avoiding them entirely was next to impossible - there were simply too many walkers.

Castiel could hear a herd coming (walkers were *loud*) in time for them to stop the van, cover the windshield and windows, and hide until it passed them by. Then they needed to wait some more until the walkers were far enough to not to be drawn back by the van's loud engine.

It wasn't the most pleasant experience. Daliah and Annabelle looked frustrated but they knew better than to make a sound. Oliver, the adorable creepy kid that he was, just plopped down in Claire's lap and immediately fell asleep. Carl ended up only having to worry about Judith, who could easily start crying and give away their presence.

His fear was almost realized when he saw her looking up at him with that all too familiar pre-tantrum look. She opened her mouth, ready to let loose, when Castiel put a finger on her forehead. She instantly calmed down, mouth snapping shut. She looked at Carl and Castiel both with wide, wet eyes.

"What did you do?" Carl hissed, barely audibly.

Castiel looked at him sadly. "Explained."

If they got lucky, they managed to wait out a herd inside an abandoned house instead of the cramped back of the van. They found a Trivia Pursuit cardboard game in one such house, which led them to two important discoveries: one, the answer to the question "which state has the highest population density in the USA?" was the state they were traveling in *right now*. Two, Cas really sucked at Trivia Pursuit.

Their second setback was that all the roads were *heavily* jammed. The van, bless its gas guzzling heart, was not exactly an all-terrain vehicle. They avoided the highways as much they could, but the side roads were almost as bad, as the many people who had tried to escape the cities had undoubtedly discovered.

Most of those roads were now graveyards to rusting, desolate automobiles, and actual graveyards to the many occupants who'd died inside of them. Somehow those poor dead bastards were still scratching at the windows in their attempts to get at the living. They stared at them with empty eye sockets, eyeballs melted off long ago, their blackened skin peeling away with every jerky movement. And the smell…

"Missing balloon-man yet?" Claire said to Enid from the van's driver's seat.

"Apples and oranges," Enid replied from her perch on top of the *slowly* moving van. She then called out, "on my right, coming around the red convertible."

"It's pink," said Jake, who was the closest. He tripped the walker with his crowbar before braining it, then gave the definitely *red* convertible a once-over. "This one's tapped-out, too."

There was one foolproof way of finding out if a car had already been siphoned: no survivor ever bothered putting the gas cap back on.

"Keep looking," Carl told him from the other side of the road. All the cars on his side had been sucked dry as well. They were running low on fuel thanks to all the detours they had to make (third setback: collapsed bridges).

"Yeah, yeah." Jake gave a limp handed salute.

They had a routine for traffic jams, too. Castiel was at the front of their odd little team, using his considerable strength to make a path, sometimes even tipping cars on their sides. The guys stayed close to him: Carl and Mikey were checking the cars on the left for fuel and supplies, and the twins did the same for the ones on the right. Enid acted as a lookout while Claire slowly inched the van down the cleared lane.

If their outdated map was to be trusted, they were about to pass by a thumbnail-sized town by the name of Clansworth. They usually got a clean stretch of road once they got away from what used to be a populated area. At last, they made it to the end of the traffic jam. Claire parked the van, tapping the metal outside her window to let Enid know she could come down.

"What's the haul?" Enid asked when her feet hit the ground.

Scott shook the gas jerrycan, the rattling giving away that it more empty than full. "Not much, somebody already sucked this place dry."

"Same," Carl said. He didn't like the idea of moving ahead on foot. The van offered a safety barrier for the younger kids. Plus, they'd have to carry Judith, who wasn't a tiny baby anymore (and didn't always like being carried).

Claire stuck her head out the driver's side window. "Might mean there are people nearby. We're not that far away from Daliah's place." She turned to Cas to ask, "can't you, like, spidey-sense if anybody's alive out here?"

"No. I'm not a bloodhound," Castiel replied, not even bothering to ask what a spidey-sense was (and really, Claire was just doing it on purpose). Carl wondered if that meant he was getting worried.

"As long as we don't have to make another detour, we should have enough to make it to Daliah's camp, right?" Carl asked. "Let's hope they'll be grateful enough to gas us up. Shut up, Jake," he added when the other boy opened his mouth to make an undoubtedly dumb joke about passing gas.

Their luck seemed to be looking up. The clear stretch lasted longer than they thought it would. It was hard to see much beyond the hilly roads, but the brake was still sudden enough to send them all scrambling on the van's floor.

"Sorry guys," Claire said sheepishly. She put the van in parking. "Take a look at this."

They all got out. Up ahead they could see why the last stretch of road had been so open. There was a long line of cars, parked in parallel across the road and well beyond the shoulders. The row of cars created something of a barrier, not enough to stop a herd, but enough to slow it down for sure. As it was, there were no pile-ups of undead trying to get past the barrier. The community was far enough away to be out of ear and eyeshot of the walkers. Up in the distance, they could see traps as well, barb wire stretched between two poles, wooden beams aimed to skewer any unlucky walker, trenches dug in the ground.

"That must've taken them a while to set in place," Enid said after a slow whistle. She looked down at Daliah, brows furrowed. "I thought Cas only saw your family. How many people do

you have there?"

Daliah, of course, didn't reply.

There was a sign next to the road, one that said. "McLaren Township, 3 miles". And underneath it, in handwriting, "Safe Zone".

"Those who arrive survive," Carl recited quietly, remembering the message that brought him and his group to Terminus, the cannibals' community. Strange how people and *things* kept trying to eat him. "How do we know we can trust them?" Carl asked, all too aware of Judith's weight in his arms. He looked at Daliah as well, "it's gotta be your group, right?"

Jake sighed. "She doesn't understand you."

"Yes, she does," Castiel said all of a sudden.

Daliah seemed to freeze. Castiel gently took her hand, leading her a few steps away to give her a bit of breathing room. She wasn't a tall girl by any definition, but he still needed to look up when he knelt down in front of her. It wasn't unusual behavior, Castiel had been the only one who could speak her language, except that this time, he spoke English.

"I understand," Castiel said, looking at the girl levelly. "You're cautious. I imagine many people haven't been very careful in their speech around you before." He waited a moment to allow her to respond, and when she didn't, he continued, "you've allowed me into your mind, that speaks of trust. You know *we* are not your enemies. Will we find any enemies beyond this point?"

Daliah's lower lip trembled. "No." Finally, she spoke, shaking her head. "The soldiers will recognize me. They won't hurt you," she said in perfectly accented English, then sniffled. "Sorry. I'm sorry, it's just what I'm supposed to do. My mom runs the hotel in town, it's where they put all the new people at first. We're not supposed to speak English there. Sometimes that's how we find out if somebody's bad."

"It's the whole town? How many people do you have?" Enid repeated the question.

"I don't know. A lot. There are a lot of soldiers, like my dad, but lots of families too. Kids started disappearing a few months ago, and then I woke up in *Gan Eden*, but they weren't there anymore." She looked at Claire. "Ellie and Josh and… and Maria. Do you remember them?"

"Yeah," Claire said sadly. "They didn't make it."

"I'm the only one left," she said, her eyes wide. "Do you think their families will be angry with me?"

"Oh, sweetie, no," Claire said.

"You must never blame yourself for surviving," Castiel told her gently. Then he cocked his head, staring at the hill where the safe zone was. He stood up, brushing the dirt from his knees, and took Daliah's hand in his.

"They know we're here," Castiel told them.

# Such a Lovely Place

"Who the hell called for a unit?"

"This is Whiskey-Oh-Two. Motion sensor went off at 537 north, over."

"Fucking A. We're sending a car."

"Copy that, Jailbird. Whiskey-Oh-Two standby ten."

"Cool it, Wazowski. Dead ain't listening to the damn radio. *Over*."

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Listening to soldiers' transmissions was a lot like listening to his siblings' bickering over Angel Radio, even though the angels were rarely as polite. *Angel Radio*, of course, was a name *Dean* had come up with several years ago and Castiel had subsequently adopted. Somehow, it became common slang among the angels who, to his amusement, were unaware of its origin.

Not that he *could* hear much, these days. Not since Earth fell and Heaven closed its gates while he and Dean had still been in Purgatory. From time to time he overheard snippets of song or conversation, but they were faint and fleeting, coming through whatever crack in the gates that had allowed him to absorb small amounts of power while he remained on Earth.

There was a single upside to Tlaloc clipping his wings. The damage, although temporary, also hurt his ability to absorb more energy from Heaven. The sigils that amplified his recharging over the past year had cracked his grace, made it fragile like fine glass. Had he been absorbing more power without the sigils to contain him, his grace would have imploded. It was fractured and brittle, yes, but at least it was whole.

Drawing on his more *extravagant* abilities was painful, not to mention *dangerous*, often leaving him grasping for control. Fortunately, he was able to channel some residual power into the vessel, making it stronger than a normal human's, its senses sharper. Even his Jedi Skills, as Enid had called them, were simply part of the human normal condition, although heightened beyond the standard spectrum (really, what did they think psychics *were*?)

His heightened hearing was a very useful ability, he'd found, although it did require his concentration. They didn't have to wait long for the soldiers to arrive; a large vehicle came quickly into view, moving down the hill in their direction. Castiel extended his hearing to pick up on the soldiers' conversation once he knew they'd been spotted. To his relief, it wasn't immediately antagonistic.

("O*h hell, they've got kids*" and "*are we really gonna send them away?*" and "*too many damn mouths to feed as is*").

The soldiers spilled out the open back of the vehicle when it came to a stop a short distance from the barrier. They were all dressed similarly: patterned, loose fitted trousers with boots, some in just plain t-shirts while others wore jackets made of the same patterned fabric. All of them carried rifles. None of the weapons were currently aimed at them, but that was something that could change in moment's notice.

There was a short, tense silence while the two groups studied one another from across the barrier. The uniformed soldiers on one side, Castiel and the children on the other.

"Well, you're not Zack," said one soldier, her eyebrows raised.

"My name is Castiel." He acknowledged her statement with a nod. Privately, he thought that referring to the undead as a single entity was odd, but not entirely inaccurate, considering the creatures' singular state of mind and herding tendencies.

The woman was smaller in stature than her companions but without a doubt the highest ranking soldier there. According to the print on her uniform, her name was *Rodriguez*, but Castiel supposed that could be her rank as well. Humanity's approach to organized fighting had been wide and varied throughout the years and across the regions, he'd found. For a species with no natural predatory attributes, they'd always been surprisingly aggressive.

Rodriguez's expression was cool. "And what brings you our way, Castiel?"

"She did." Castiel tugged gently on Daliah's hand. She'd inexplicably hidden behind him. The expression on Rodriguez's face wavered when Daliah stepped into her line of sight.

"Holy shit," said one of the soldiers. "Isn't that Isaac's kid?"

(Castiel was becoming better at reading facial expressions, but sometimes nuances were lost on him. Later, he would berate himself for not recognizing that the soldiers' disbelieving expressions were also laden with sorrow.)

Rodriguez's command to "stand down" sounded more like a warning, and not just to her soldiers. She crossed the barrier with a practiced leap, coming to stand in front of Castiel and Daliah. Taking the girl's shoulder, she took a moment to study her, as if to make sure she was not a changeling or anything of the sort.

"Are you okay?" Rodriguez asked.

Daliah nodded, not letting go of Castiel's hand.

Rodriguez turned her gaze to the rest of the children in the group, lingering on Claire and Carl who were both obviously injured. She looked them over once, twice, three times before finally asking in a tense voice, "You brought anyone else with you?"

"I'm sorry," Castiel said simply. "There's no one else."

Her stern expression crumbled for a second. Then she nodded and said in a tone that brooked no argument, "Okay. Kid, let's go. The rest of you, too. We've got doctors to look you over."

At Rodriguez's prompting ("leave the pedo van, no one's coming this way but Zack") they squeezed into the back of the soldiers' vehicle. It was large enough to accommodate all of them, although some (Castiel included) had to be seated cross-legged on the floor.

Rodriguez was in the passenger's seat, using the radio. It was noisy where Castiel and the children were seated, the netted fabric over the heads was doing nothing to block out the wind and the noise from the engine. Rodriguez's voice was low enough that Castiel knew they were not meant to overhear her.

("*Tell General Ulysses we're bringing new people in. I* know *what he said, but they've got Isaac's daughter with them.*")

"Cool jeep," Jake called over the noise, drawing Castiel's attention. He'd commandeered a spot on the bench, his knees bracing his brother's back. "Your engine's knocking, though."

"She's had a tough run." A soldier who'd identified himself as Rollins patted one of the jeep's rails. "How the hell d'you make it here in that big ass van, anyway? Roads are supposed to be jammed all the way to NYC."

"They were," Jake said smugly. "We cleared them."

"Bullshit," Rollins replied. Castiel tuned out the rest of their argument.

As the vehicle approached the settlement, Castiel realized there was an unusual scent in the air. He needed a moment to discern what it was. The hill was patched foliage, wild grass becoming yellow from drought. The town itself was surrounded by another barrier; tall walls constructed with seemingly every type of hard material they had been able to get their hands on. There were makeshift watchtowers as well, not too far apart from each other, manned by more soldiers.

"So, you're making 'rounds to bring these kids to their homes? Awfully kind of you." It took Castiel a moment to realize that the blond man who'd been sitting next to him was, in fact, addressing him.

"Yes?" he said, unsure of the correct response. He knew the words were anything but appreciative.

"Hill," one of the soldiers addressed the blond man. "Leave it to the general."

The tall gates were opening in anticipation of their arrival. Daliah was practically hanging from the side of the jeep. Claire was hanging on to one of her arms, worried expression on her face, afraid the girl would leap out of the moving vehicle. Quite a few people came pouring through the gates. Some of them were dressed in uniform, but most of them were not. In fact, the soldiers were making a half-hearted attempt to keep the crowd inside.

Castiel couldn't see Daliah's parents among their numbers. He knew their likeness, as after all he had manifested their presence when he'd absorbed her soul, and he had seen them quite clearly afterward when she'd allowed him to look in her mind.

"Where's my mom and dad?" Daliah wondered, trying and failing to meet the soldiers' eyes. "Didn't you tell them I was coming?"

At their lack of response, the realization finally dawned on Castiel. He was a coward, for he turned down his senses, dreading the event that would surely follow.

The vehicle came to a stop in front of the gates. Claire let go of Daliah, and in a split second, she was gone, crashing into the arms of a young woman. She looked similar enough in color and facial structure to be Daliah's relative; a sister or a cousin, perhaps. No one else carried the same similarity, much to Castiel's dismay. The family he'd seen in Daliah's memories had been at least twenty souls strong.

Following the soldiers, Castiel stepped out of the jeep, coming to stand at a respectable distance. The remaining children clustered around him, quietly watching the unfolding reunion. Claire took his hand in hers, squeezing lightly.

Daliah repeated her earlier question. The older girl's face was lined with tears when she replied in a voice too soft to hear. As it turned out, the normal human hearing range was more than enough to pick up on Daliah's response of grief-stricken crying.

"Oh no, oh no," Claire was murmuring. "What happened?"

"We sent out search parties for the missing kids," Rodriguez's voice seemed to be unnaturally steady. "Plenty of civilians volunteered, didn't really give us a choice." She sighed. "Used to be, that family was the biggest one in town. Now look at those two."

The two girls held each other tightly, bodies trembling in shared grief. Several people from the crowd tried to draw them elsewhere, laying comforting hands on their shoulders. The girls didn't budge.

Then, something unexpected happened. A tall, sandy-haired man broke out of the crowd. His eyes were wild as he ran straight toward them, calling out for-

"Daddy?" Annabelle cried out.

She met the man halfway, jumping into his arms and knocking them both to the ground. Neither seemed to care as they clung to one another, openly sobbing.

"*Qué día*," Rodriguez breathed, shaking her head.

Castiel looked at Rodriguez questioningly.

"We picked up Marv a couple of months back, same day we lost Isaac and his wife," she explained. "Said his camp got overrun, all gone but him. Man was half dead when we found him." She continued to watch the father-daughter reunion, adding, "Damn lucky."

Castiel wasn't sure if he agreed or not.

# Breaking Bread

The topic was broached on the first night of their journey. They had spent the better part of the day getting past a large herd, and most of the evening diverting it in the opposite direction. Then they settled down for the night at a clearing in the woods. After they ate, the younger children - Judith, Oliver, Daliah and Annabelle - were sent to sleep in the back of the van, while the teenagers (and Castiel) stayed up by the campfire.

As they sat by the dwindling fire, the teenagers argued on how much, if at all, they should say on the topic of their abduction. They knew, of course, that people would want to know where they've been all this time. Some of them had left families and friends behind, people who likely had been hurt by their disappearance. Castiel had suggested that they simply tell the truth. For reasons unbeknown to him, a few of them expressed reluctance to do so. Claire, to Castiel's surprise, was the biggest advocate for censorship.

The fire had gone out by the time they came to a decision: they *would* tell the truth. From a certain point of view. The truth was: they were kidnapped by a madman. They killed the madman. They freed Castiel. They made their way home.

"And if that's not enough," said Enid, jabbing at the remains of the fire with a long stick, "There's always Plan B."

"We don't need a Plan B," Claire insisted.

"Come on, Claire." Enid let out a sigh, annoyed by the long debate. "Why is it such an issue? Monsters have been real for years. People aren't going to lose their minds if they find out there's, like, a variety."

"Enid's got a point," Carl said. He threw some dried leaves on the embers, watching as they crumbled away. "Besides, without a Plan B, Plan A is just *a* plan."

Plan B was, of course, to tell the truth. The *whole* truth.

They were kidnapped by a madman (an ancient pagan god). They killed the madman (with a holy blade). They freed Castiel (an angel of the Lord). They made their way home (with said angel, their protector and sometimes driver).

"It sounds like crazy talk," Mikey muttered.

"Who cares?" Enid pointed toward the van. "It's going to come out sooner or later. What if one the kids blabs?"

"I won't tell!" Oliver's petulant voice carried over.

"You'd better not wake my sister, Ollie," Carl called in the boy's direction. "Go back to sleep." To the rest of them, he said, "What's the problem when we've got proof? Cas has, like, super powers." He threw up a hand in excitement. "He could lift the van!"

Mikey snorted. "Yeah! And *then* they'll think he's on something! Ever seen how strong somebody gets in a 'roid rage?"

"Have *you*?" Claire asked Mikey in disbelief.

Mikey's shoulders squared defensively. "What? You don't know where I've been."

"What's a roid?" Castiel had gotten lost in the conversation. "Is that some kind of a potion?"

"*No one* is going to think *Cas* is on steroids, man. Have you *seen* him?" Carl looked incredulous. Then his face whipped toward Castiel and he added, sheepishly, "No offense."

"None taken, I think."

Jake sighed loudly. He was lying on the ground, arms pillowing his head, and so far hadn't shown a decisive opinion. "You guys are overthinking this. Just flash 'em if it comes down to it, Cas."

"Dude," Scott gasped. He punched his brother's arm, who yelped in response.

Jake sat up, rubbing his arm. "*A wing*. I meant flash them *a wing*," he spluttered. "Jesus Christ."

"*Dude!*"

"Was that innuendo?" Castiel wondered. "That's very inappropriate, Jake."

"Nobody's flashing anybody. *Just stick to Plan A*," Claire snapped, glaring at each of them in turn until they all looked suitably cowed.

Several days later, when they had reached McLaren, and before the soldiers came to collect them at the outer barrier, Claire had repeated the very same thing to all of them. Later, when she hugged both Annabelle and Daliah and promised that they wouldn't leave before saying goodbye, she also told them to remember what they had talked about.

The exchange didn't escape Rodriguez's attention. She had been trying to urge them back into the vehicle, telling them, "The girls can go with their families. The rest of you will be staying at the base." Rodriguez added, "You'll get a chance to rest and have a meal that's not expired, for once."

"And we'll meet your superior, of course," Castiel supplied.

The rest of the children had been reluctant to leave the two young girls behind, even with their families. They only climbed back into the jeep at Castiel's encouraging nod. He didn't miss the angry huff Rodriguez let out at that. She said nothing, but this time she joined them at the back of the jeep, sending one of her subordinates to sit at the front instead.

McLaren turned out to be a much larger community than any Castiel had seen since the outbreak. Outwardly, it appeared to be flourishing. It seemed they had a working electricity grid, access to a water supply, and enough fuel to have people driving their vehicles even

inside the walls. On the other hand, many looked thin and tired, townspeople and soldiers alike.

Castiel had noticed a strange scent on their arrival. Inside the walls, he noticed another one. A cloying, too sweet scent. Rotten produce, he suspected. The crops fields they passed had too many empty patches and too many dark leaves. As if they had been struck with blight. No doubt, McLaren had exhausted all scavenging opportunities nearby, and now they were attempting to grow food on their own. And by all appearances, they were struggling.

Castiel wasn't the only one to take notice.

"Those apple trees are way too close together," Carl said, off-handedly, as they passed the small orchard. "It's going to destroy their roots."

A few minutes later they arrived at the military base. It was a closed off area, with sturdy looking fences that were too well put together to have been placed there after the outbreak. Rollins, the soldier who had chatted so amiably with Jake before, was all too happy to tell them all about the community's history.

"We've expanded *a lot* since the beginning. Actually, it started out with just the base," Rollins told them when they parked. He and a few other soldiers escorted them into one of the buildings. "Way it was, we took in any decent people who'd shown up. Pshh, now? Now we can barely feed the ones we got…" He trailed off when his commander gave him a smoldering glare.

They were led up the stairs and into what the soldiers called "the rec room". By Rodriguez's orders, one of the soldiers stayed with them - the young blond one who had glared at Castiel throughout the entire drive over. He didn't say anything to them, just stayed standing by the door. The room itself was furnished with a threadbare couch, a few sitting areas, a large television, and shelves with stacks of well-used board games (Castiel eyed the familiar Trivia Pursuit with interest. He had found it quite educational before).

Rodriguez had been true to her word. A few minutes past their arrival, someone came by with a cardboard box filled with food and water. It surprised him that they would be so generous, despite their obvious struggles. To Castiel's further surprise, the children had looked to him for approval before reaching for the meal. Then they happily tucked into the fresh food, all except for Claire, who sat down on the window sill next to Castiel, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

"It's like we're under arrest," Claire muttered darkly, glaring at the soldier standing by the door.

Castiel sighed. "Claire, they haven't been unkind to us. Cautious, yes. As you would have been." He raised an eyebrow at her scowling face. "What are you doing back here? *Go*. Eat a vegetable."

She turned her glare to him. Unfazed, he stared her down until she gave up.

"Fine," Claire said, stomping her foot, and didn't return his answering smile (which was all right by him). The others dragged over a seat for her, which she accepted by flinging herself down with probably more attitude than such an action warranted. She picked up a peach from the box, only to toss it to the table in disgust. "Gross, there's a worm in it."

"Don't throw that away. It's great fertilizer," Carl said without looking up. He was busy trying to wrestle food into Judith who was shaking her head and smacking her lips at every morsel he offered.

Mikey asked in surprise, "How would you know?"

"We used to grow our own food at the prison," Carl replied. "Dad was really into it."

"*Your* dad? *Rick Grimes*?" Mikey asked, mouth agape. "You're screwing with me."

"Nope. He was going through a pacifist phase," Carl said with a shrug.

A knock sounded at the door. Rodriguez stepped inside, followed by another woman who carried a small bag to one of the tables. Castiel assumed that she was the general he was supposed to meet. Then again, the woman didn't carry herself like the soldiers did, and she wasn't dressed like one, either. She wore a bright orange blouse and her graying hair was set loose around her shoulders.

"This is Dr. Ganguly," Rodriguez said, inclining her head at the older woman.

Castiel considered the unfamiliar woman. "You are a physician?" he asked. Come to think of it… he had no idea what human physicians actually did. He'd observed them in hospitals, a few too many times, in fact. Yet, in hospitals, they had all of those blinking machines, which he doubted fit into Dr. Ganguly's bag. There were also physicians in Dean's strange television show, where the doctors spent most of the time kissing, which… no, unlikely.

Dr. Ganguly smiled. "Among other things." She turned to the children and said, "General Ulysses asked me to make sure you guys are all okay. I'll also ask you some questions. If you're comfortable with that."

Castiel looked at the children for guidance. Claire was scowling. Judith was thoughtfully chewing on a cucumber. The rest appeared a bit baffled but otherwise didn't look as though they caught onto any threatening social cue that he himself had missed.

"And in the meantime..." Rodriguez held the door open and looked at Castiel.

"You'll interrogate him?" Claire shot, grabbing Castiel's wrist as he went past her. "Is waterboarding still a thing?"

"Claire-" he started to say. She dropped his wrist, still scowling.

So far, there was nothing about these people that stood out to him as a threat. Nevertheless, they obviously didn't trust *him*, in particular, and he had learned that people who were afraid tended to react in strange ways. Perhaps with waterboarding, whatever that was. He could do his part in reassuring them. As far human allies went, they didn't seem half bad.

"They'll stay right here, correct?" Castiel looked at Rodriguez meaningfully, who nodded once in reply. "Then let's go see this commander of yours."

# The Two Generals

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Castiel took in his surroundings. The office was spotlessly clean and meticulously organized. His eyes were drawn to the wide, gleaming wooden desk that stood beneath a tall window at the far end of the room. Everything was furnished in shades of brown and red, from the pleasantly worn leather sofas to the books that stood in impossibly even rows upon their shelves. Works of art adorned the walls; impressive graphite sketches alongside children's colorful scribbling, all framed and positioned in measured spaces.

General Ulysses was a tall man in his later years. Like his subordinates, he was dressed in a loose-fitting, patterned uniform. Unlike the other soldiers, there was a star pattern on his uniform's jacket and a wing-based insignia above his breast. He wore a distant expression, carrying himself with straight-back confidence and authority. His blue eyes shone with wary intelligence.

"General Ulysses, sir." Rodriguez greeted her general with a curious gesture - a hand to the temple, fingers held together. "This is -"

"Castiel, I've heard." The general gave him a long, hard look. "You got a last name, son?"

"Winchester," Castiel replied with hardly a pause. Helpfully, he added, "Like the rifle."

"Like the rifle," Ulysses repeated, his voice betraying no emotion.

The general had a very firm grip for a human. They shook hands for a very long time, statistically speaking. Well above average, in Castiel's opinion. Perhaps, he mused, theirs was a subculture that emphasized physical contact. Human social norms - so changeable.

In his peripheral vision, he noticed that Rodriguez's mouth was twitching.

He must have done something wrong because the general had dropped his hand abruptly. "Have a seat," Ulysses ordered, gesturing at his desk. "Lieutenant Rodriguez, give us some privacy."

"Your community is impressive. It looks like you're doing well for yourselves," said Castiel, sitting down in his appointed seat. He noticed, on some level, that the chair was a little short and just a bit flimsy, creaking under his weight. But then, in his true form, Castiel was larger than this building. Most man-sized things seemed too small to him.

"We try," said Ulysses, approaching the tall window behind his own seat. With a side-eye glance at Castiel, he drew back the blinds, letting the high noon sunlight pour into the room. The light beamed brightly in Castiel's eyes.

"Oh, thank you," Castiel said honestly. The weather was rather lovely outside.

The general looked at him strangely, contemplatively. He sat down in his own plush seat. Then, all of a sudden, his entire demeanor changed. A bit of tension lifted from his shoulders and a small smile graced his mouth. He looked like a kindly grandfather. Even his voice was softer when he said, "They tell me you came from up north. Must've been quite a journey, what with all the dead folks along the way. How did you manage to get past them?"

"Uh, quietly."

"Quietly? With a toddler?"

"Luckily," Castiel added with a fleeting smile.

"Hmm," Ulysses reclined in his seat. "Well, who am I to look a gift horse in the mouth?" he asked, chuckling at his own comment. Before Castiel could ask, he continued, "In my book, you deserve a hero's welcome. I hope my people have been treating you right, all in all."

Castiel inclined his head. "Yes, you have my gratitude for the fresh produce in particular." The chair wobbled when he leaned forward, lowering his voice in a secretive tone. "It occurred to me that, um, the children might not have had their nutritional needs fulfilled. Relying on preserved food as they were." When the general merely frowned at him in response, Castiel tried to clarify, "I've learned that such deficiency could stunt their growth. So, yes, I really must thank you. You've been very generous, considering your own situation is quite dire."

Ulysses let out a huff in surprise. All of a sudden, his kindly manner disappeared, as quickly as it had appeared. He sat up straight, asking "What makes you say that?"

"Well, a balanced diet *is* a key factor in both the physical and mental development-"

"About our 'situation', wise guy."

Castiel looked at Ulysses in surprise. "I've seen your crops," he said. "You suffer from widespread blight. Pests as well, is that not correct?"

Ulysses gave him a long, searching look. Finally, he gave a tense nod. "Too many people living off of one land," he conceded. "We've got all sorts around these parts - doctors, engineers, teachers, you name it. Decent, hard working people, but not a single green thumb between them."

Castiel narrowed his eyes. "You're not taking in new people, obviously. But surely you'll allow Annabelle and Daliah to remain with their families?" He relaxed at the general's nod. "You should know that one of my charges has had farming experience. He'll be happy to tell you what he knows before we depart. We'll leave as soon as we can, you don't have to worry. So long as we have fuel for the journey." He added gravely, "As much as you can spare."

There was a short pause. "You've got a lot of balls, I'll give you that."

Castiel glanced down, blinking. "Just the usual amount."

"Son, a gallon of gas is worth as much as a week's ration." Ulysses looked at him grimly. "What if I say no? You'll leave those two girls to starve come winter?"

"You misunderstood. Carl is a kind boy. He'll tell you what he knows, regardless of your decision," Castiel said, adding, "General, we won't ask for more than you can give us. Your people drive when they could walk. You're not worried about your gas consumption at all. You're actually producing usable fuel, aren't you? That's good of you, even the Israelites had to replenish after eight days." He licked his lips. He wouldn't say this to Ulysses, but he'd been able to smell their efforts from the moment they had arrived in McLaren, even taste the byproducts from the distillery on his lips.

Ulysses sucked a breath between his teeth. "All right. Since you know so much about us. Sure, the lab boys can get some knock off fuel. It's not easy to make, and it's not perfect, either. Your engine's going to be stone cold dead in a few months, running this stuff."

"We won't need that long," Castiel said, shrugging. "Will you help us, then?"

"Not so fast," The general looked at him in consideration, mouth set in a frown. "You know, when the children started going missing, we thought it was an inside job. We didn't start looking outside the gates until number three disappeared from her bed. She was Rodriguez's niece, Maria. Great kid." He was watching carefully for Castiel's reaction. "Is she dead?"

Castiel looked at his hands. "She was. And she is. I'm sorry."

"*Four* went missing. Only one came back. Two, counting the new girl. Damndest thing, that. Her father showing up here of all places," Ulysses said dryly. "Apparently, the same damn thing happened to him, right before Zack got to the rest of his family." He sighed, then said. "Now, I spoke to those girls-"

"How are they?" Castiel asked.

"Peachy. They told me the craziest story. Now, somehow you got them back to us, safe and sound. And to top it all of, you'll be teaching us how not to starve?" Ulysses shook his head. "Got to look that horse in the mouth, son. It's just the kind of world we live in."

"I don't know any horses," Castiel admitted, "but I'll tell you anything you'd like to know."

The general slammed his fist down on the desk, temper flaring for the first time. "Four kids, not a mark, not a sound, Castiel Winchester. Who in God's Zack-ridden Earth did it? And how the hell did *they* make it past our walls?"

Castiel hesitated before he started to dutifully explain the turn of events. As the children had wished, he carefully censored the supernatural aspects of the story. He explained that he himself had been held captive by the same person who had abducted children from different camps and communities. Gently, he told Ulysses that most of the children had been killed by that person before two teenage girls had managed to overpower and kill him.

With every word that came out of his mouth, Ulysses' expression darkened. "Alright, that's enough," he said roughly, waving his hand in a request for silence. Then he all but slumped in

his seat, sighing heavily. "I want to believe you, I really do. Those two little girls? They seem to think the world of you. Very loyal. The rest are too, or so I'm told. Rodriguez tells me they do everything that you tell them to."

"That's an odd accusation," Castiel slow, frowning. "What *did* the girls say to you?"

He gave Castiel as significant look. "The same damn thing you told me. The *exact* same thing, *word-by-word*. You…" he sighed again. "You coached them pretty well, I'll admit."

Castiel winced. The general had a point. Indeed, the girls had been coached. *By Claire*. And so was he, although it bothered him a little to learn that he was as transparent as a pair of nine-year-olds.

"Now, lieutenant Rodriguez thinks you're out to play us. I'm not sure I agree. See, I know all about loyalty," Ulysses said. "You either force it, or you earn it." He sighed, looking very tired. "So which one was it? Forced or earned?"

"What was it for you?" Castiel wondered. He thought not of the children, but back to his own subordinates of past, those he had let down, those who had let *him* down. Perhaps he could have learned something, had he met Ulysses before. Then again, he had been so arrogant back then. Unlikely that he would have listened to the advice of a human commander.

"Bit of both," Ulysses admitted after a short pause.

Castiel nodded, then said, "General, I'm not a threat to your people. I don't have a secret agenda. The whole truth is... complicated. There is little to gain by it. The person who invaded your community is gone. Isn't that enough?" He held out his hands in a gesture of surrender.

Ulysses' eyes narrowed. "You know I need something better than that."

"Very well," Castiel sighed. He looked the general in the eyes. And reached out.

He didn't do this often. Such a connection… he needed to bring a bit of his true self to the surface, just to the edge of his human vessel. While harmless, it greatly disturbed the intended target. Nevertheless, he looked long and hard into the eyes of the man sitting before him.

And here was the other reason Castiel rarely did this. Humans felt *so much*. Now more than ever. It was overwhelming. Here was a soul who had known sorrow, had known loss and grief. Here was a soul weighted down by immeasurable guilt, and had done unspeakable things. Castiel would have pitied him, but they were *all* like this now. Every human survivor carried their own horror story inside of them. Too much of everything tucked inside a tiny flesh body.

He looked at Ulysses, and Ulysses looked at him.

Castiel said, very calmly, "The other children... I couldn't save them. I couldn't save *any* of them. I was completely helpless. They saved *me*. The ones who didn't make it, they were…

consumed. I knew them, and I couldn't help them. That is my burden." He allowed Ulysses to glimpse at his memories, knowing the man would not understand entirely, but that he would understand enough. "Do you see?"

"Stop," Ulysses gasped. "I believe you. I believe you."

Castiel broke the connection.

Ulysses gasped, ripping his gaze from Castiel. Those were the remnants of the connection: Ulysses' heart was about to burst out of his chest and he was afraid, no, terrified. Little by little, the panic subsided. Ulysses' jumbled thoughts slowed. Then became ordered. Then, at last, became private.

Castiel rose from his seat. He leaned back against the desk next to the general, putting a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," he murmured, looking out the window. "I understand now, you're trying to make amends for what you've done. I know the feeling." He stated. "You're still a good man, Leonard Ulysses. Despite it all."

Ulysses lifted his eyes to stare at Castiel in undisguised horror. "You're…"

"Not here to judge you," Castiel said simply. "You know me now. We're not so different, you and I. Will you help me carry out *my* duty?"

Ulysses shut his eyes, sagging in his seat. He nodded.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my God, this chapter was a nightmare. It was intended as a character study of Castiel, and he fought me the whole way.

Cas was a big deal in Heaven, right? So, I really wanted to play him off against real soldiers. Who are, by the way, are kind of always vilified in post-apocalyptic stories? Which is kind of weird considering most western countries, US especially, have a serious strong mindset of supporting the troops. At the end of the day, people are people.

Anyway, in my experience, high ranking officers are basically just politicians. I figured playing off someone like that against Cas, there's going to be a lot of posturing, a lot of shady attempts to throw him off guard. Of course, it won't work, 'cause Cas just doesn't get it. But as the good general found out, Cas isn't dumb. Sure, he was unsettled, but not in the way he was intended to be.

Two more things: 1. "Zack" as a title for zombies is taken from WWZ. I really love that book. 2. It's totally possible to make homemade fuel from all kinds of things. Thanks, Google.

Please let me know what you think! Your feedback is MY fuel!

# Where the Wild Things Grow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You want me to teach them *what*?"

"Agriculture," Castiel repeated. It didn't take long for him to rejoin them at the rec room, flanked by lieutenant Rodriguez and an older man who was introduced to them as general Ulysses.

"You know," Enid was quick to point out, "farming and stuff."

"I know what agriculture means," Carl grumbled, becoming exasperated by all the attention. He angled his head so his good eye landed on the general. "I'm not saying no," he stressed, voice even, "but you should know, I'm probably not the best guy for the job."

Ulysses gave a minute inclination of his head. "I have a feeling you'll do fine."

"You don't know me," Carl pointed out.

The old man's eyes crinkled. "That's why they call it a hunch, son."

"I'm not your son," Carl said dryly, ignoring the way Enid's foot suddenly bumped into his in warning.

None of the soldiers seemed affronted by his attitude, in fact, Ulysses was starting to look a little fond. "My apologies," the general said amiably.

"I'd like to speak to the children privately," Castiel said. Immediately, the general responded, giving Castiel a brisk nod. He took the rest of his people with him, even Dr. Ganguly and the glaring soldier on guard duty.

"What did you tell them?" Claire rounded on Castiel as soon as the door closed again.

Shifting a little on his feet, Castiel answered without meeting her eyes, "Oh, you know, Plan A."

"Really."

"It worked beautifully, Claire," Castiel assured her. Without giving her a chance to ask anything else, Castiel turned to Carl. "You have doubts?"

Carl felt his shoulders slump. Unconsciously, he raised a hand to his face but stopped himself before he touched the fresh bandage. The others hadn't seen his face when Dr. Ganguly took off his bandage (and she herself had been kind enough not to look horrified) but he was still feeling all too exposed.

"Carl?"

"I don't think I can help them," Carl admitted in defeat. For the first time in forever, he felt like he was unraveling, anxiety getting the best of him. "I *know* I said we had a garden at the prison, but I only *helped* with it. Only *sometimes*. My friend's dad Hershel, he was the one who was running things. He used to have a farm. We did stay there a while but I didn't help there much *either*. 'Cause I just got shot. Again."

Carl took a breath, feeling the heat rising in his face. "It was before the eye thing. So, I really only ever helped out at the prison - a little - and we only spent a year there, and a lot of other stuff happened so it wasn't like I was always *at* the garden *anyway*. So, um, I don't think I'm really *capable*-"

"Carl," Castiel interrupted, coming to grip his shoulder. "I have faith in you," he said plainly.

That was all it took, really. An angel saying he had faith in Carl. What the hell happened to his life? Somewhere in Actual Heaven, Hershel was looking down at Carl *and laughing his ass off*.

Over in the next few hours, Carl found himself regurgitating Hershel's teaching to the people of McLaren. It had been a little intimidating at first, though he did his best not to let it show. Yet the more he talked, the more he found himself remembering. It never stopped feeling weird, though.

They were not complete beginners, he had learned. Technically, they had a lot more experience than Carl did. The farmers in McLaren had taught themselves using books with titles like "The Organic Awakening" and "Easy Urban Gardening". Unfortunately, they had picked up a lot of misconceptions along the way. It wasn't their fault; while Carl himself had had practical lessons in sustainable farming, they had to do with manuals for growing cherry tomatoes in store bought dirt.

It was approaching sundown when Carl was preparing to end the lesson (again). He dipped his hands into a bucket of soapy water, scrubbing away in an attempt to remove the accumulated dirt. His students (all twelve of them!) stood around him in a circle, their notebooks held at the ready for his next insight.

"To wrap it up," Carl said, "the most important thing, always, is to keep the soil healthy. Do as I showed you and next time these-" he jerked his head to the pile of sickly-looking potato plants, "-will definitely come out better."

*Scribble, scribble, scribble*.

Picking at his nails under the water, Carl added to the lesson's conclusion, "And, um, like I said, keep it diverse. Because, um..." Twelve pairs of eyes looked up from their notebooks expectantly. "Well, I'm not sure," he admitted, sheepishly. "I just remember that rotation is really important. Three or four years at least."

He tried to remember what else Dad or Hershel ever said on the topic. Likely, they never got around to it. The prison hadn't really worked out for them in the long run, but maybe the folks

in this community would have better luck.

One of his students - a spiky-haired, heavily tattooed middle-aged woman who looked weirdly out of place in her farmer's overalls - raised her pencil. "Could you show us the layering technique one more time?" she asked.

Carl stopped scrubbing his hands. "Sure," he sighed.

The sun had set by the time the lesson was really finished. McLaren was a large community, well lit even at night, with enough space inside its walls to hold the town, the military base, and even a small lake. Carl had learned that they were using the walker herds as protection from raiders and kept the herds moving away from the community by the use of remote controlled drones.

Tomorrow morning, the soldiers would use the drones to clear up a path for them, distracting the walkers in their way. Together with the fuel they'd received and the brand new map approximating the state of the roads ahead, Carl and the others were looking forward to a much easier start to their journey.

Tonight, though, they were going to stay at a very nice house in the rich part of the town. Castiel must've *really* made an impression on the general, Carl thought.

As he approached the house, Carl saw that the van was already parked and ready in the driveway. To Carl's surprise, it was no longer white but covered in graffiti. At least the two duffel bags were still secured to the roof. One of them was starting to look a little light, he noticed. It was amazing how much food they went through in just a few days on the road, in spite of their rationing.

Enid was sitting on the porch steps, illuminated by the small light above the front door. Her hair was tied in a ponytail, and there were paint spots on the tan, oversized jumpsuit she'd liberated from the ship. She gave him a little smile in greeting when he approached.

"Please tell me there's hot water," he said straight away. He'd forgotten how *hard* the farming stuff actually was. Besides the fact that he was sweaty and covered in muck, Carl's back and shoulder muscles were incredibly sore.

"Yep, Claire just went in. I'm supposed to go next but..." She looked at him appraisingly. "You can have my turn."

"*Thank you*," Carl said and meant it. He sat down next to her on the porch. "So, what'd you do all day?" He looked at her and then, pointedly, at the van.

"I helped Cas set up the wards," she whispered, leaning closer.

"The warts?" Carl asked, confused.

"Wards. W-A-R-D-S." Still whispering, she explained, "We painted them all over the walls. They're these symbols for protection. Cas says they stop bad things from coming in, like, um, *evil things*. Not walkers, though. Anyway, I don't think the townies are supposed to know

about it." She added with an embarrassed smile, "I *might've* used the last of the paint on the van."

"It looks nice." Carl grinned. "Is that a unicorn?" He gestured to a blob on the van's hood and then dodged Enid's answering swat. "Seriously, though," he added, lowering his voice, "the wards thing - how does it work?"

"Magic?" Enid's mouth quirked. "Who knows."

"Huh. Well, it wouldn't hurt to do the same in Alexandria," Carl suggested. A sudden thought came to his mind. "Hey, you *are* coming back, right? You're not thinking about staying here or anything, are you?"

"What?" She pushed at his shoulder, mindless of the dirt on his shirt. "No, I'm not thinking about staying. Are you kidding?"

Her angry expression softened when she sighed. "I get it now, okay? It's not *just* about surviving. I… want to go home. I miss everyone. I miss Glenn and Maggie."

"Me too," Carl admitted. "My dad must be losing his mind. He's so… so *fragile* when it comes to losing people he loves. When Mom died… It was bad, Enid, really bad." He swallowed the lump that rose in his throat. "I'm worried," he said, and almost wanted to laugh. *Worried* didn't really cover it.

"It's going to be okay." Enid's hand landed on top of his on the porch step. "These guys gave us a better map and everything. I mean, Annabelle's staying here, and the twins are practically our next-door neighbors anyway, so it's straight to Alexandria from here. We'll be home in no time, okay? Your dad's not going to lose you or Judith."

She squeezed his hand. "Now quit whining and go take a shower; you *smell*."

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"'Little pigs, little pigs, let me come in.'"

Carl had to hold back on his laughter. Most people adopted a strange intonation whenever they read out loud to children. Not Castiel; his gravelly voice was as monotonous as if he was reading out a grocery list.

"These are highly advanced animals," Castiel said, pausing in his reading. "I wonder, is it based on a true story?"

Castiel and the two younger children had been occupying the hideous green leather sofa in the borrowed living room. Judith had progressed to sitting in Castiel's lap, her blonde head tucked under his chin. She was staring at the book in his hands in wide awake fascination, tracing the pages with her stubby fingers. Oliver was curled up at Castiel's side, head listing forward as if he was on the verge of falling asleep.

Leaving them to it, and trying not to laugh out loud, Carl tiptoed his way back up the stairs. He and the other teenagers were "celebrating" their last (and technically only) night in McLaren. While Carl had been slaving away in the mud and manure, Jake had somehow managed to procure a half-full bottle of whiskey from his new soldier buddies.

"They've moved on to 'The Three Little Pigs'," Carl announced, taking back his spot on the king-sized bed. "Whose turn is it?"

Deciding not to waste the whiskey by simply *drinking it*, they'd come up with a game which they called "Cozy Apocalypse". It was simple: someone would ask a question, and the person who came up with the *least* horrifying answer had to drink. They went through a few rounds before it hit them: they forgot about Mikey.

"S'not *fair*," Mikey insisted, slurring a little. "You guys *know* I didn't go out much." He took another shot of whiskey. "Okay… just. Just, one more and then I *fold*. Heh."

"No, man, you're done." Carl laughed, reaching over to battle with Mikey for the bottle. He then settled back against the headboard. "Okay, I've got one. Worst meat." He added, "We had snake a couple of times, but it's actually not that bad." He didn't mention the time he'd *almost* been tricked into eating human flesh. *Almost* didn't count.

Scott and Jake looked at each other. "Rats," the said in unison.

"Rats, definitely." Claire agreed. She gave a full body shudder. "Bugs, too."

Enid said, "Raw turtle." She sniffed. "Poor little guy."

"I'm the loser," Carl said cheerfully. He took a too large gulp, then immediately began to splutter. "It's really good," he insisted in a raspy voice. He coughed again. "Ugh, walkers wasted? Personally, I lost count."

Jake and Claire gave a thumbs up. "Same."

"Nine," said Mikey happily, even though he wasn't supposed to be playing anymore.

"*Ugh*. Maybe fifty. I sneak past 'em," Enid admitted, throwing her hands in defeat. She started to reach for the bottle, but before she could take it, someone else had plucked it from Carl's hand.

"Zero," Scott said quietly. He took a small sip. They all gaped at him.

"What, *really*?" Mikey asked in drunken bewilderment. "But you told Cas you can shoot!" He gasped. "Didja *lie?* 'Cause y'know, lying to an angel, that's gotta be, like, a mortal sin."

Claire burst out into laughter. "I *love* drunky-Mikey," she said between giggles, ruffling the boy's hair.

"I *can* shoot," Scott said over Claire's laughter. "Just never shot… you know." He sighed. "Forget it."

"*Dude*," Mikey pushed at Scott's shoulder with probably more force than necessary. "I was *joking*." He gave an exaggerated frown, leaning closer to Scott. "Hey, um, didja ask him yet?" he said in a stage-whisper, throwing glances at Carl. "'Cause I can. I can *totally* ask him for you."

"Don't worry about it," Jake answered for his brother. "It was a stupid idea anyway."

"No, no, no, c'mon. It was an *awesome* idea," Mikey insisted, his eyes wide and sincere "'Cause you guys! You guys are awesome. I love you guys."

"Jeez, man." Jake drew a hand across his face. "Don't make it weird."

"Uh, what's going on?" Carl asked, frowning. "What were you gonna ask me?"

Jake sighed. "It was just a dumb idea, alright? Me and Scotty, we've been thinking, you know, where to head next. We thought about staying *here*, but these guys, they really mean it about not taking new recruits." He shrugged. "Mikey heard us talking, so-"

"*So I said,* I said to them, 'why don't you ask *Carl* if you can come to *Alexandria*?' Because, you know, your dad's like, in charge now," Mikey said, looking at Carl expectantly.

"Um." It was kind of true, he supposed. Rick always did end up running things, even when he tried to avoid it. "Sort of? But… I thought you guys were going home."

Scott's eyes widened. "God, no."

Jake said at the same time, "No way in hell we're ever going back to Sanctuary."

"Bad place?" Enid guessed.

Scott huffed, then took another drink. "You don't want to know."

"Thing is -" Jake said, rubbing at his eyes tiredly, "The thing is, we wanted to make a break for it, we did, but it was impossible, man. These guys, they don't fuck around. They either kill you or they turn you into one of them. And if you run... which is probably what they *think* we did..." Jake gave a dry little laugh. "That Aztec douche was probably the best thing that ever happened to us."

"They might kill you too if they see us together," Scott added with an apologetic air. "Trust me, this is a fight you don't want to pick."

There was a little pause of silence.

"Guys, I want to ask you something. Don't, um, don't take it the wrong way." Watching the brothers for their reactions, Carl continued, "How many people have you killed?"

They both flinched. "Way to put it out there, man," Jake muttered, taking the bottle from his brother's loose grip. "Shit. I don't even know. Myself, less than walkers, but..." He grimaced, then took a long swing from the bottle.

"Why?"

Jake chuckled humorlessly, looking away from them. "'Cause we're bad people."

"That's bullshit," Claire interrupted. "You're a bit of a dick - sorry Jackie, you know you are - but you're not *bad*."

"Come back with us to Alexandria," Carl said decisively.

The brothers exchanged uneasy looks. Scott started to ask, "Didn't you hear what-?"

"I heard you. Sounds like you were in a bad place and it sucks, it really, really sucks, but it doesn't mean you don't get a second chance. And if those Sanctuary assholes come looking for you, well, we'll protect you." Hearing Jake's snort, he added, "Seriously, we're badasses. Right, Enid?"

"Yep." She grinned.

Jake's eyes were suspiciously red. "If you're sure," he said, and then, at Carl's answering grin, launched himself across Claire and Enid (both of them loudly protesting), tackling Carl in a bear hug.

"You're all right for a wannabe pirate." Jake sniffed.

"You're still an asshole," Carl said, laughing and clapping the older boy on the back.

Of course, that was when Castiel decided to show up. "What are you doing?"

Jake squawked in surprise, scrambling to his feet and at the same time throwing the bottle of whiskey down at Carl. It landed on the mattress between him and Enid, spilling its contents and staining the pretty, flower patterned sheets. Carl and Enid jumped to their feet, shoving and smacking away at Jake in indignation.

They stopped at the sound of Castiel's loud, disappointed sigh.

"Busted," Claire coughed into her fist.

Castiel picked up the now almost empty bottle, examining its faded label calmly. He looked at each of them in turn, unimpressed.

"Really?" he asked.

Chapter End Notes

Another difficult chapter, sorry for the wait. By the way, you guys remember what Sanctuary is, right? *cackles*

# On the Road (Again)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Carl had thought that luring walkers away using drones - *military grade drones!* - would be pretty exciting. Okay, watching the little guys take off *had* been kind of cool; Carl had *ooh'd* and *aah'd* along with everybody else. But after that, there was really nothing for them to do. They couldn't even *see* the video feeds - and that was supposed to be the best part!

No, they were just told to wait by the gates, packed up and ready to go, while the soldiers worked their magic back at the base. As it turned out, coordinating herds took time. Mostly because walkers - who would've guessed? - were *slow*.

They weren't exactly left to stew, though. People came by to keep them company while they waited. Carl had received a weirdly heartfelt thanks from general Ulysses, hugs from Daliah and Annabelle, more questions from the farming brigade, and a semi-terrifying lecture about trauma aftercare from Dr. Ganguly. At the end of it all, Carl somehow found himself feeling both anxious *and* sorry to leave.

When the All Clear came (at last) Carl climbed into the front of the van next to Castiel. For once, no one fought him over it. They were leaving McLaren with a full tank and several jerrycans strapped to their roof. Carl's muscles were *still* sore from yesterday's farming lesson - he'd definitely *earned* Shotgun.

It was still pretty cramped in the back, never mind the two girls they were leaving behind (who hadn't taken up that much space to begin with). Carl could hear Judith bouncing about with her new favorite word on repeat ("George"), Oliver squeaking, "Ow, don't sit on me!", the twins shoving at each other, and the general shuffling and sniping that happened whenever anyone had inevitably invaded someone else's space.

"Never let me drink again," Mikey moaned pitifully.

"Don't you *dare* throw up in here, Michael," Claire snapped at him.

"Please, will you all settle down?" Castiel squinted at them in the rearview mirror, voice close to pleading. "*It's been five minutes.*"

There was a brief respite of silence.

"I gotta pee," Claire said sheepishly.

Thankfully, they got through the day without major incidents. It wasn't exactly a perfect ride - far from it. The road conditions kind of sucked, limiting their speed. And, on a few occasions, they needed to clear up a path using their old routine. On the other hand, the intel was solid and the walker presence was noticeably thinner.

They drove west rather than hugging the riverside - as taking the shortest route to Alexandria meant having to make suicide runs by cities and major highways - past the wrecked ruins of Philadelphia and deeper into the mainland.

"Do you think anyone made it out?" Carl asked Enid during a pit stop close to the city. The view was pretty depressing. There was nothing but rubble beyond the green road sign; not a single skyscraper had survived.

"Maybe," Enid answered, but he could tell she didn't really believe that.

Later, when they had stopped to refuel for the third time (the van really gobbled up the homemade stuff), Carl suddenly realized that they were actually making pretty good progress. If they kept their pace they might even reach Alexandria as early as *the next day*. The thought shook him so much that he didn't even protest when the twins staged a hostile takeover of the front seats.

Daylight burned while they drove through an area that was, all of a sudden, much more rural than before. The younger kids were starting to get cranky about being cooped up in the van for so many hours, so Carl and the others banded together to try and entertain them. An irritated toddler in a closed space was never fun, and Oliver, who was freakishly well behaved 99% of the time, could make that 1% *count*.

Carl suddenly got into his head to try and teach Judith how to whistle - she looked at him like he'd gone nuts - which somehow turned into teaching *Castiel*.

"Look, look, Cas, *it's easy*," Carl insisted but then struggled to actually perform through his (very manly!) giggles.

Castiel shifted around, too big to fit comfortably in the back of the van. He wore a look of intense concentration on his face as he tried, once again, to produce a passable whistle but only managed a wet, weird little exhale. For someone who supposedly had *feathers*, he really sucked at making bird noises.

"That was *terrible*," Enid hooted, crumbling sideways. Castiel glared at her, which only made her laugh harder.

Judith giggled hysterically, finding their behavior absolutely hilarious.

"It's physiologically impossible for some," Castiel said when he finally gave up, looking unimpressed with all of them. "I know these things," he insisted.

"Dad could *so* whistle, Cas," Claire pointed out, wiping at her tear-streaked face.

"Yo, weirdos," Jake called out, stopping Carl from asking her what she'd meant. "We should probably start heading down south, right?"

Castiel sounded a little grumpy when he replied, "Not today. We need to find someplace for tonight; it will get dark soon."

They ended up stopping at a side road motel that looked secure enough for one night. According to the peeling sign at its front, the motel was called, inexplicably, 'Hunters Run'.

("Run where?" Castiel had puzzled).

'Hunters Run' was small, rundown, and was probably a crapsack long before the dead got to walking. Nevertheless, at some point in time, someone had put a halfway decent barricade around it, using what looked like most of the furniture. Jake managed to back the van up into a small gap in the barrier, effectively sealing it with them inside. There was much groaning and grumbling as they all climbed out of the van, limbs in desperate need of stretching after sitting so long in such a cramped space.

"We couldn't find a Hilton?" Claire asked, standing with her hands on her hips.

"I like it," Castiel informed her. He studied the single-floor structure intently. "Carl, make a noise."

Carl grinned. He handed a squirming Judith over to Scott before sticking two fingers in his mouth and letting out a shrill whistle. Carl couldn't hear any stirring walkers from their position at the edge of the parking lot, but of course, Castiel was a league of his own. Almost immediately, he began to call out the weak spots:

"Something's moving in the back, over there. Raccoons, I think, but keep your guard up just in case. And there are several *walkers*, as you say, in rooms eight, eleven, and-" Castiel paused, tilting his head like a bird- "and nineteen. Let's make it quick."

"I'll go with you," Carl volunteered.

"Me too," Claire announced, bringing out her sharp silver blade with a showy flick of the wrist. Castiel had taught her his neat little sleeve trick, which she'd been practicing. "What's with the look, Cas? You still want me on the bench? 'Cause even the doc said I'm A-OK. Here, watch this." She bounced from foot to foot easily, as if she hadn't been limping just a few days ago. Even the bruising on her face had faded considerably. "Ta-dah."

"You heal like Wolverine." Enid nodded appreciatively.

"My God, you're a nerd," Claire said with a grin, earning an eye roll from Enid. "So, are we cleaning out this dump or what? Let's get to it already, I'm *starving*."

They cut down the walkers quickly (but didn't bother the raccoons) even though Castiel probably could've taken them out with much less fuss. Claire was stronger than she looked, and pretty efficient with the knife, too. Carl knew that of course, having seen her practice, but it was different watching her handle actual flesh and blood walkers.

It was getting to be pretty chilly at night. Unfortunately, the motel rooms were unlivable. Whoever had stayed there before had left behind a broken down mess. No one wanted to play housekeeper for the sake of one night, so they dragged the few surviving mattresses out to the parking lot, and lit up a small fire in order to keep themselves warm.

Even though he'd had far worse in the past, Carl was finding it difficult to fall asleep. His mind kept circling back to Alexandria, thinking that maybe, if their luck kept, tomorrow he'd spend the night in his own bed. He hoped that his dad was hanging on to his sanity and that Michonne wasn't blaming herself too much for their disappearance. He would tell them the truth, he decided. They might not believe him (and Claire might not like it) but he owned them that at least.

"Can't sleep?" Carl heard Claire ask in a sleep-addled voice. She wasn't speaking to him, though.

Castiel gave a small huff of laughter. "You're not funny," he said anyway.

"I'm hilarious."

Carl rolled over to his side. He saw Claire sitting up in her bedding, yawning. Out of all of them, Claire knew Castiel the best. They had a history, that much was obvious, although so far Carl hadn't managed to get much detail out of either of them. It was funny: back in Heaven (or whatever), they hadn't really been able to see the faces of any of the fake parents, but he kind of thought that Claire's dad looked like Castiel.

"Your brooding is keeping me up," Claire said, wrapping her blanket around her body like a cocoon.

"Sorry."

"What's the matter?" She asked. "You've got a face."

"A face?"

"You look worried."

"Oh."

Castiel looked up to the stars, sighing. He didn't say more for the longest time. Claire didn't prod, though she kept looking at him expectantly. Carl's eye was shutting on its own when Castiel's voice jerked him back to awareness.

"I haven't heard from Dean in several days. It's… unlike him."

"He prays a lot?"

"Every night," Castiel told her, sounding puzzled. "Normally."

*Prays?* Carl thought, frowning a little.

It was hard not to like *Cas*, he was funny and badass and kind of weirdly adorable. But every now and then, Carl would get a reminder that *Castiel* was a legitimate, kid-you-not, actual biblical-fire-and-brimstone Angel with a capital A. It was hard not to get tongue-tied whenever he'd stop to think about it.

"Don't worry so much," Claire said as she laid back down, head propped on her hand. "It's been awhile since I met 'em, but those brothers seemed pretty tough to me, y'know? Like, they can handle it." Then she added, as if the thought just came to her, "Maybe he's just busy? It's the end of the world and stuff. Things *can* get a little intense."

"I noticed," Castiel said, his voice soft.

Some time passed alongside a lull in the conversation. Carl managed to fall into a light sleep, waking up every now and then from Jake's snoring, or the crickets' chirping, or from rustling whenever Castiel got up to feed wood scraps to their little fire or take care of the occasional walker that wandered a little too close to their camp.

"Hey, Cas." He heard Claire murmur at one point. Her voice was soft, half-asleep. "You told Dad you wouldn't age, so how come you look older? You turn on your aging settings or something?"

When Castiel didn't reply, she continued insistently, suddenly seeming much more awake, "Wait, you did, didn't you? Oh my God, you totally did. *You turned on aging because of Dean!*" She started to laugh a little, the sound coming away muffled.

"Claire," Castiel said in an exasperated voice.

"It's kinda sweet."

"Go to sleep, Claire."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait, guys! Less time to write lately, sorry to say. Next chapter will be up this week, fingers crossed. We're approaching the climax of the story, so keep your seatbelts buckled!

# Whiplash

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Carl was being chased.

He couldn't see (*he couldn't see!*) the dead closing in on him, but there was no mistaking their presence. Safety was just up ahead but his legs… there was something wrong with his legs. They were weak, heavy. Useless like his missing eyes.

Surrounded by darkness, Carl dropped to his hands and knees. If he couldn't run, he'd might as well crawl. Only, that didn't seem work, either. There was no getting away, no matter how desperately he clawed at the ground. Helpless and blind, he waited. All the while, the walkers' rumbling cries went on and on…

"Should I wake him up?" a voice said. It sounded a lot like Enid. "I should probably wake him up."

"Mrrrph," Carl let out, stirring. The walkers disappeared but the noise remained; the dream faded to the back of his mind, leaving behind the van's engine familiar rumble. He pressed the side of his face more firmly to his warm pillow and just about managed to slur, "Are we there yet?"

"No," said Enid's laughing voice. "We've only been driving for, like, an hour."

"Oh," said Carl, who suddenly realized that his pillow was actually Enid's lap. Which he'd kind of drooled on. A bit. "Um, sorry," he said, pulling himself upright.

The two of them had been sitting side by side, using the back of the front seats as backrests. Somehow, he'd fallen asleep, fallen *sideways,* and ended up with his head in Enid's lap. It had been a crappy sleeping position judging by the newly formed crick in his neck. Wincing, he rubbed at the sore muscle.

"No problem," said Enid, rubbing at her thigh to chase away pins and needles. "Jeez, you dropped like a rock."

"Yeah," Carl said through a barely stifled yawn. He looked down at the cause of his exhaustion, finding Judith dead to the world.

Unusually, she hadn't moved an inch while Carl had slept; still flat on her back on top of a bunch of old blankets, mouth gaping a little. Her chest was rising and falling with every deep breath. The van's steady rumbling had managed to lull her back to sleep just as soon as they'd gotten back on the road. He'd laid her down between himself and the wall, so that she would wake up with him right beside her. It had been still kind of dark back then - he only now spotted the dry tear tracks on her face.

Judith looked so peaceful now. Earlier that morning, she'd been anything but.

They'd spent the night camping out in an abandoned motel's parking lot, protected by a sturdy barrier and Castiel's ever vigilant watch. Judith's sudden screaming had sent Carl scrambling to his feet, knife clutched tightly in hand. He remembered how his heart had hammered, looking around wildly for whatever it was that had gotten the drop on them.

It hadn't been anything he could've killed with a blade. Only nightmares.

Of course, Judith's crying fit had managed to call for every walker in the area. Soon, they were clawing at the barricade, gnarled hands grasping uselessly through the cracks. All the while, Judith's crying went on and on, and none of Carl's usual tricks seemed to help at all.

"She's frightened," Castiel explained sympathetically, hand dropping to his side. His own tricks worked just as well as Carl's. "In her dream, she was left alone. She, well," he hesitated, "I believe she fears abandonment?"

In the end, she'd simply worn herself out. Carl too, apparently.

Carl sighed, tucking the blanket a little more securely around her. "I guess she still has some catching up to do," he said. Looking at the little cramped space that made for the back of the van, he found that she wasn't the only one.

Mikey was dozing lightly, head bouncing against the wall at every bump in the road. Jake's feet were propped next to Mikey's head, their owner somehow finding the space to lie down. Jake's eyes were closed but Carl didn't think he was asleep, not from the way he was squirming and sighing every so often.

"Dude, stop moving so much," Scott said, jabbing his pencil in Jake's ribs. At some point along their journey, Scott had gotten his hands on a sketchbook, one that he'd been filling rather diligently. Mostly with sketches of eyes, because he didn't seem to know how to draw anything else.

"Yeah," Oliver's squeaky voice rose in support. The young boy squirmed under Scott's arm to peer at the page critically. "Now it isn't *proportional*," he decided, saying the last word carefully and with conviction.

"What?" Scott said, squinting down at the drawing. He squeezed Oliver. "Yes it is. Shut up."

Oliver squeaked. "You should draw Carl next!" he said excitedly, still struggling to get away from under Scott's arm. "Then you won't *have* to draw the other eye!"

"Oh, wow. Thanks, kid," Carl said, ignoring Jake who proved himself awake by laughing. "Where the hell are we anyway?" Carl craned his neck around (remembering, too late, about his cramp). He had his back to Claire in the driver's seat, so when he looked up, he could see a little past Castiel's profile in the passenger side. It was early yet, but the sun had risen while he'd slept, giving way to clear blue skies.

Castiel, who was sitting shotgun and therefore in charge of navigation, didn't respond until Claire reached out and poked him in the shoulder. "Um," he said, map crinkling in his hands.

Claire answered instead. "Just passed a little town called, get this, *Pow Pow Pow*." She let out a little snort. "*If* you can call two houses and church a town. Which you can, apparently." She poked Castiel in the shoulder again.

"It's funny because of the repetition," Castiel supplied in response to the unspoken prompt.

"Ah, close enough," said Claire, chuckling. Then she asked, "Where's your head today, Cas?"

"Which one?" asked Castiel, distractedly. "Take the next turn."

"*Okay*..." said Claire. The van made a sharp turn. "That's gonna take us off-course. *Again*. Is there something out there?"

"I don't like this neighborhood," Castiel said plainly. He seemed to relax a little, though.

"We're not near the DC area yet, are we?" Carl asked.

Jake snorted. "Not for a while. Don't forget, we gotta go around Sanctuary, too." Unlike his sibling, Jake was tall and broad shouldered, and always seemed to take too much space. He nearly kicked Mikey in the face when he pulled himself into a sitting position. "This tin can is gonna end up killing me."

"Awesome," Scott grumbled, "more legroom for the rest of us."

"What, you think I won't take you down with me?" Jake shot back before smacking the sketchbook out of Scott's hands.

It ended up hitting Mikey in the face. He startled awake with a snort, looking around wildly. Then, finding the projectile in his own lap, picked up the sketchbook and hurled it back at its owner.

Scott ducked behind his arms ("it wasn't me!") while Oliver scuttled closer to Carl and Enid, narrowly avoiding stepping on the sleeping Judith.

"Watch it," Carl warned, pushing the boy to Enid's side.

"Boys." Castiel turned around in his seat, looking so disappointed that even *Carl* felt his face lit up with shame. The effect was promptly ruined when Castiel added, "Can you not?" Which was such a *Claire* thing to say that the rest of them couldn't help cracking up.

"Oh yeah, you told them," Claire snickered in the face of Castiel's exasperation. "Carl," she called, "can't you make them behave back there?"

"What, taking care of *one* toddler isn't enough?"

"Hey," Jake protested, feebly. After a moment, he seemed to perk up again. "Cas, can I ask you something? Like a... *theological* question?"

"This should be good," Enid muttered in Carl's ear.

Jake continued, "What's *the deal* with circumcision, anyway?"

"I was right," Enid said, voice coming muffled from covering her mouth with her hands. She couldn't see Castiel from where she was sitting, though. He looked almost embarrassed, which definitely piqued Carl's curiosity.

Claire was having none of it, though. "Seriously?" she choked, incredulous. "Of all the things… out of *everything* you could *possibly…"* She huffed. "And you're asking about *your dick*?"

Quietly, the freshly woken Mikey chimed in with, "Um, actually. It's a fair question."

Castiel, for his part, just shifted in his seat. "Technically, circumcision was a human practice since before the, um, covenant. And as far as I understand, it's not always done for religious purposes."

"Covenant?" Enid asked, curious despite her second-hand embarrassment.

"It's from the Bible," Claire said, sighing. "God got Abraham to, like, sign off their new religion by, you know-" she lifted one hand to make a snip-snip motion with her fingers. "Just the tip."

"Well…" Castiel said, sounding remarkably embarrassed. "That's not *quite* right. God never spoke with Abraham. It was, um, Gabriel, actually. He liked to, uh, 'mess' with his charges." Castiel winced. "In all fairness, none of us thought Abraham would *actually* do it. We didn't realize at the time that it would jump-start the Abrahamic religions."

When no one said anything, Castiel cleared his throat, adding, "In retrospect, I suppose that as far as pranks go... it got a bit out of hand?"

The silence lasted for several moments until Claire said, with conviction, "You guys are *such dicks*."

"It's been said, yes."

Once again, Carl found himself caught between awe and amusement. "I can't wait to tell Gabriel," he blurted. "The priest back at home, not the-" he pointed up, blushing.

"Archangel?" Castiel said in response. "Well, you could try, but he's dead."

"Oh."

"I think you made him sad," Enid whispered.

"I didn't know," he whispered back. "I was just making conversation."

"You guys can die?" Mikey asked, wide eyed.

"Oh, wow," Claire cut in, impatiently. "I changed my mind. Go back to talking about dicks."

"Of course," Castiel said. "Everything can die - some beings even get to have an afterlife."

"What's that really like?" Carl found himself asking. "If I can ask, I mean-" he glanced at the others, who grew still. They've all lost people. "Is my mom, you know, happy?"

Castiel turned in his seat, facing them once more. "She should be," he told Carl. "If her soul did ascend-" he paused to glance at Claire who had suddenly shoved at his shoulder- "I mean, *yes*. You mother would find it very difficult to be unhappy. Heaven resonates with souls individually. For example, one of Sam and Dean's friend's choice of Heaven had been to crack the system itself." He let out a little huff of amusement before continuing, "Once a soul goes through Initiation-"

"Through what?" Enid interrupted.

"Initiation. Each soul spends some time reliving their most cherished moments," Castiel explained, matter-of-factly. "After that, it depends on the individual."

"And, the, uh, *the souls*, can they see us? I mean, my mom, is she… is she looking down on me and Judith?" Suddenly, after all the crap that Carl had done, that seemed very important.

Castiel inclined his head. "Well, that depends. Initiation may take minutes, or it may take centuries. Then, your mother would have to *want* to know where she really is. And she would need to put in an official request." He grimaced. "I've been told by the angels in Human Resources that there's quite a lot of paperwork involved-"

"Um, wait," said Enid. "Human Resources? Heaven's got *paperwork*?"

"...Figuratively?" Castiel paused. "I really shouldn't be telling you all of this." He sighed, looking away from them. "In truth, your time *here*, short as it may be, is worth tenfold the eons you will spend in Heaven. It's a pale reward for those who-" he cut himself off, sighing again. "I hope you won't get to see it, not for many years to come."

They drove in silence for a short time. Then Carl spoke up, finding another burst of courage, "What about the other place?"

"I don't recommend it," Castiel said, immediately. "It *smells*. And the current king of Hell is insufferable."

"No vacationing in hell, got it," Carl muttered, exchanging another bemused look with Enid.

Carl turned around to stand on his knees, gripping the shoulders of the front seats for balance. There was no partition between the front and the back, making it possible for Carl to see that they were heading down a vaguely familiar road. Vaguely familiar because it looked like everywhere else these days - bumpy cement, unkempt greenery, dead bodies. It was nowhere he recognized.

They were approaching a long, curving overpass. "What do you think," Carl asked, taking in the scenery, "can we reach Alexandria today?"

Claire glanced at him in the rearview mirror. "Fewer walkers around, roads are not as crowded anymore… we might just make it." Somehow, she didn't seem very thrilled about it. A little too late, Carl remembered that getting to Alexandria also meant splitting ways.

"That's cool," said Carl, tentatively. He pushed at Claire's shoulder lightly. "You said *walkers*. We're rubbing off on you."

She shrugged.

"Hey, you know what this whole drive's been like?" He paused for effect. "A real trip."

Claire groaned. "Please, stop." But he caught her smiling, just a little.

Carl grinned. "I've got more. Do you know what a ham sandwich, a jellyfish, and a bus driver all have in common? It's-"

"Look out!" Claire called out, hitting the brakes.

Carl felt himself getting thrown forward. Claire yelled something else that he couldn't make out over the sound of the tires screeching. Then, he heard a *crack*, almost like multiple gunshots going off at the same time. Later, Carl would understand that it had been the sound of their tires ripping, all thanks to the spikes strewn just past the curve in the road.

For a few precious seconds, Carl fought against the momentum, scrabbling to get his hands under his body. He wanted to lift himself up from the horizontal position he had found himself in, upper body squished between the front seats while his lower body dangled in the air. He felt the van swerving out of control, felt someone clinging to his legs.

Carl barely managed to raise his head when a weight settled over his back and a hand came down on the back of his neck, bracing. "Let go!" he gasped.

Right above Carl's head, Castiel called out a warning. There was another *crack*, almost like thunder, complete with a burning light and a suddenly overwhelming smell of rain.

Carl must've blacked out then. He remembered, vaguely, the impact when they'd hit the guardrails at the side of the road. He remembered his stomach rolling with anxiety when they *hadn't stopped*, soaring past the edge of the overpass. He remembered the momentum shifting, the swan dive to the ground. But he had felt none of it.

Then the light died out and Carl found himself on his back. He opened his eye, seeing Claire's stricken face staring down at him. She was hanging upside down from her seat belt, long blonde braid swaying lazily under her head.

"You okay?" Her voice trembled.

"The fuck just happened?" Jake gasped out, somewhere by Carl's feet.

"We crashed," Enid replied. Carl could see the top of her head in his line of sight. "Is everyone-"

"*Yes*," said Castiel, a little too sharply.

"We're upside down," Carl muttered dumbly. His eye was stinging a little and he realized with a jolt that he could smell smoke. And beyond that, the too-sharp scent of the McLaren home brewed gasoline."We should, we should…"

"Easy," said Castiel, who was, all of a sudden, peering down at Carl. "You're unhurt." Castiel looked up, easing back as he did. "Claire, can you release your seat belt?"

Carl remembered, suddenly, her teasing Castiel when he'd insisted she'd wear it.

"Yeah." Claire reached around herself to struggle with the buckle. "Got it," she said, before dropping down to the van's ceiling, managing to align herself after a bit of a fumble. Her knee came dangerously close to hitting Carl in the face. "Cas?" she asked, looking worried.

"I'm fine," Castiel said. "Help the others."

Carl took a deep breath. "I'm okay," he said, sitting up slowly, aided by Claire pulling on his arm. He winced at the expectation of pain - but none came. None except for that cramped neck he'd gotten earlier. "Really, I'm okay," he told Claire, a little dazed.

Then, he felt himself go cold. "Where's-" he said sharply, eye darting from one stunned face to the next.

Enid's hair was hanging wild around her face, and she was holding on to little Oliver, who seemed to be on the verge of tears. Jake, Scott and Mikey were sitting up, wearing identical expressions of alarm. Miraculously, everybody looked to be okay, if a little shaken. But none of that mattered, because he couldn't find his sister.

Then he spotted her, squished between the wall and Jake's large backpack. For a moment, she seemed just as stunned as he was. She stared at Carl with wide blue eyes, mouth hanging open. Suddenly, her face scrunched up and she started to cry.

Scott made as if to reach out to her. Carl shoved him out of the way. "Hey, hey, it's okay," Carl said through the lump in his throat. "Shh, it's okay, I got you."

He didn't pick her up, despite her reaching out to him. Rather, he started to run his hands over her, trying to see if she'd been hurt. Judith was having none of that, crawling into his lap on her own. "What happened?" he asked, face pressed to her blonde head.

"Trap," Castiel said simply, letting out a ragged breath.

"Guys," Claire said in alarm. "We need to get out of here. *Now*."

Carl looked up. The windshield had been cracked, but there was no mistaking the black smoke that was coming from under the van's smashed hood. It was becoming thicker by the second, and already seeping inside the vehicle, stinging their eyes and throats.

The back doors wouldn't open until Jake gave them a few solid kicks. They took in the clean air greedily. As he stepped out, Judith clutched tightly to his chest, Carl's foot landed in an

oily puddle. It was coming from underneath the upturned vehicle, where their supplies - food, *gas canisters* - had been strapped to the roof.

"Move," Carl told the others, bodily shoving Mikey forward. He looked back to see Claire and Castiel getting out of the front cabin. Only Castiel wasn't doing so well: he was leaning heavily on Claire, looking dangerously close to collapsing.

"Jake!" Carl called, not stopping, because he still needed to carry Judith away from the smoke and the inevitable fire. "Something's wrong with Cas!"

They managed to get to what seemed like a safe distance. The overpass curved above several underpasses that looked like they had been tunneled right through the ground. The one they had found themselves in was a rather narrow road, bracketed on both sides by natural rock. There was nowhere to go but farther up the road.

Carl glanced back just in time to see the van catching fire. It spread quickly, flames engulfing the entire vehicle in a matter of seconds, aided by the gas spill.

"Oh, man," Carl breathed. As one, the group came to a stop, watching their ride home literally going up in flames. Even Judith stopped crying, mesmerized by the sight.

"*Cas*," said Claire urgently. "What's wrong?"

"It's fine," Castiel said, voice rougher than usual. "Just… give me a moment." He pulled away from Jake and Claire to sink down to his hands and knees, head sagging between his shoulders.

"You look like you're gonna hurl," Carl pointed out, helplessly caught between wanting to help his friend and wanting to comfort his terrified little sister. She wasn't crying anymore, but letting out little hiccuping breaths, body trembling. "What happened?" Carl asked.

*How is it that we're okay and you're not?* went without saying.

Castiel let out a ragged sigh. "Power surge. I used my wings to protect you from the crash." His head lifted. Carl was startled to see that his nose was now bleeding. "I, ugh, I seem to have misjudged the amount of power needed for a-" he gasped, then gritted out the rest of the sentence- "partial manifestation in this plane."

There was a pause. "No dexterity?" Enid asked softly, although Carl wasn't sure why.

Castiel gave her a tired, crooked smile. "No dexterity."

"Well, don't do it again!" Claire said roughly, hitting Castiel lightly in the shoulder. Worryingly, he swayed.

"Maybe try not to crash the car next time, then?" Jake snapped at her.

"She didn't," Carl remembered. Somehow, in the rush to get away from the van, he'd forgotten. "You said it was a trap? But where-"

"Guys," Mikey called out, pointing in the direction they came from. It was hard to see through the black smoke, but there were people coming up from behind them. A lot of people. And Carl doubted these ones were friendly.

A few were standing on the overpass, examining the crash site from above. Most of them, though, were stalking toward the smoldering wreckage with their guns drawn. The fire and smoke made a good distraction, but it wouldn't take long for these guys to realize that Carl and the others had gotten out.

"I see them. Don't think they spotted us yet," Jake grunted. He'd managed to grab his crowbar from the van. Moving it back to the crook of his arm, Jake used his considerable strength to haul Castiel back to his feet. "Cas, c'mon, man," he said, pulling Castiel's arm over his shoulder. "We gotta go - *now*."

They didn't get very far. "Nobody move!"

Carl looked up. There was a big man standing on the elevated ground that was the side of the road. A big man, holding a very big gun, and pointing it right at them. He let out a shrill whistle. "They're over here!" he called out, not taking his eyes off his targets. To them he said, "Hands where I can see 'em."

"How?" Carl couldn't help saying, arms tightening around Judith.

"Don't get clever with me, kid," the stranger said, smirk half hidden under his bushy reddish beard. The barrel of his rifle shifted slightly, lining up so it was pointed directing at Carl and Judith. "I promise you won't like it."

The other men (and they were only men, Carl noticed) emerged through the smoke. Like the bearded asshole who'd caught them, they weren't shy about where they were pointing their guns.

"Ah shit," one of the newcomers said, spitting on the ground. "I hate it when they have kids." He didn't lower his weapon.

"What did I tell you, Walt?" the bearded man said, dropping down to the underpass. It was a fairly long jump, but he seemed practiced, landing on bent knees. "I told you: fix the goddamn guardrails, why don't you?"

"Anyone you know?" Mikey muttered in Jake's direction.

It was Scott who answered. "Not the Saviors' MO."

One too many time that day, Carl felt his stomach drop. "Did you just say-"

"Shut the hell up," another one of the newcomers barked. He was a tall, rat faced man who seemed to blink practically non stop. He made a vague gesture with his handgun. "Let's see what you've got on you."

"Everything we *had* went up in flames. Thanks to you, *assholes*," Claire pointed out. Her hands were clenched at her sides.

"That is *enough*," Castiel said, shaking off Jake's support. He seemed a little better - two seconds ago he couldn't even stand on his own - but there was no mistaking the effort it took for him to take those few steps forward. "We have no firearms," Castiel said, gesturing behind him. "We have no resources for you to rob anymore. *Lay down your arms*."

Carl might've imagined it, but did Castiel look relieved to have all the guns draw on him alone?

There was no way he could take all of them, Carl thought desperately. Castiel looked like a stiff gust of wind could knock him down. A few of the newcomers exchanged nervous glances nonetheless. Carl didn't blame them - who would want to be caught at the end of *that* stare?

"You're kidding me, right?" The bearded man let out a little chuckle. He called over his shoulder, "Take the girls," and then, calmly, shot Castiel in the chest.

Carl gasped. Judith jerked in arms, letting out a terrified wail.

"No!" Claire cried, silver blade falling to her hand.

But Castiel, who merely staggered, lifted a hand to stop her advancing. He straightened, looking no worse than before.

"*Shit*." the bearded man's face turned blotchy. He hissed, taking a few steps back. Without taking his eyes off of Castiel, he called out, "Anyone got any *fucking silvers*?"

"Those won't help you," Castiel said calmly, slowly advancing on the group. Two more men took shots at him, managing to hit him several times in the upper body. This time, he didn't even flinch.

"You should go," Carl advised calmly, feeling anything but.

For a moment it seemed like the newcomers would do just that. "Nobody move!" the bearded man yelled. Carefully, he took aim.

Castiel froze.

"Not silver, huh?" the man said, teeth bared in a snarl. He was looking at Castiel but pointing his gun right past him.

"*Just go*," Carl repeated quietly.

"No chance in hell, kid." the man's mouth twisted in a smirk, eyes still fixed on Castiel. "Not until I figure out *what* you are."

"I'll *show* you," Castiel said, voice deceptively calm. "Let them go."

Save for a few, the other men looked like they were ready to bolt. "Maybe we should…" one of them, the rat faced man, started to say.

"No!" the bearded man snapped, spittle flying. "And *you*, boys and girls, get over here." When they didn't immediately obey, he growled, "Move. *Now*," and fired a warning shot at their feet.

It all happened very fast.

The bullet hit the gravel by Carl's feet. Somehow he staggered back, still having felt the impact. Ricochet, he realized. There was no pain. No until he looked down and saw nothing but red.

"Judith?" he whispered at the suddenly listless weight in his arms.

Somewhere far away, and somehow all around him, chaos erupted. From the corner of his eye, he saw Castiel grabbing the bearded man by the face. His skull gave away with a sickening crunch. People yelled, screamed, cursed. More bullets got fired.

None of it mattered. Not while Judith's blue eyes stared so blankly, face somehow still untouched by all the blood.

Carl sank to his knees. "Please," he said through his tears, shaking the small body again and again. "Please, no, *no*."

And then Castiel was there. He knelt down next to them, laying a bloody hand on Judith's chest. "Close your eyes," he ordered.

*Close your eyes,* Carl thought to himself, in his own voice and in his own head. Yet, somehow, he knew that the thought hadn't been his own.

All by itself, his eye squeezed itself shut.

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys, sorry for the unexpected delay. I hope you enjoyed (?!) the chapter. Please feed me back some feedback! xoxo

# In the Crossfire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The gravel exploded at their feet. Claire hissed through her clenched teeth but stood her ground, determined not to be intimidated.

Assholes: End of the World Edition. Claire would know their type anywhere - trigger-happy, greedy-ass, survival-justifying *douchebags*. Before, they could have been anybody, had probably been nobody, and now thought they were *somebody*. They were the ones who preyed on others - because they could, because it was easy, because they thought that there was no one left to stop them.

Consumed by rage and old hurts, Claire rushed forward before the shot was done echoing. She wanted to take down that ugly, grizzled sonofabitch before he managed to take another potshot at them, wanted to wipe that smug expression right off his face.

Castiel beat her to it. He'd been closer to the bearded man and managed to close the distance between the two of them in two fell swoops. Castiel normally fought bluntly and aggressively, even more so when he was actually angry. There was nothing refined or graceful about it: in the course of a single breath, Castiel was ripping the gun out of the way and seizing the man by the face, cutting off his howl.

The man's head caved in a glorious splatter of blood, bone and brain matter. The sight of it broke down the rest of the assholes' composure, as well. Claire heard their cries of fear and outrage. She was about to call out a warning when someone slammed into her from behind, knocking her to the ground.

All hell broke loose.

"Get down!" Scott yelled directly in her ear, forearm pushing down on her shoulder blades. The gunfire drowned out everything but the sound of his voice. "Claire, stay down!"

Claire stopped her struggling, feeling Scott's thin chest sagging in relief against her back. With a grunt, she lifted her face, scraping her chin on the road. Her mouth opened in a muted cry at what she saw.

Castiel was just standing there, facing the group of men and the ensuing onslaught. The nearly headless corpse dropped, forgotten, at his feet, rifle likewise discarded. Minutes before, he hadn't been able to stand on his own. Now, he wasn't doing anything else. Castiel didn't even twitch as bullet after bullet ripped through him.

Well, not exactly *through* him, Claire realized with a jolt. The men were clearly hitting their marks, but there were no exit wounds, no gaping holes in the back of Castiel's coat.

"What's he *doing*?" Scott asked loudly into her ear. He stayed on top of her, breaths heavy enough to disturb the dust on the road.

"Wasting their ammo," Claire gasped out the realization. The guns couldn't hurt Castiel. He was making sure they couldn't hurt any of them, either.

The smell of burning flesh and gunpowder permeated the air. The men were in a frenzy, shells flying from their assortment of firearms. They were forced to draw nearer to Castiel, their backs to the fire that was only getting worse - bigger, smokier, trapping them with nowhere to go but farther down the road.

The underpass, barricaded at both shoulders, was the perfect killing zone. But the tables had turned. The men didn't seem to realize that they were evening the odds with every bit of ammo they wasted. Or, more accurately, pretty much *destroying* their odds, because the moment they'd run out of bullets would be the moment Castiel would turn on them. Claire just hoped there'd be something left for her, as well.

It would've worked, but unfortunately, not everyone was on board. The one called Walt wasn't taking part in the shooting frenzy. On the contrary: he seemed to be trying to get it to *stop*. Only, his words and frantic gestures seemed lost on the men. It wasn't until he pulled the trigger on one of his own that they finally listened.

"Don't shoot - it's not human!" Walt shouted, finally able to make himself heard. "Save your bullets, goddamn you!" Holstering his weapon, Walt took a step forward, pulling out a long silver knife instead. He held it up as he approached Castiel, palm out, as close to placating as someone with a knife could be. "We don't want no trouble," Walt said in spite of the ugly twist of his face. "Why don't we just… oh, *fuck it all*."

Claire heard it, too; someone was crying. Blood rushing in her ears, she scrambled to her feet from underneath Scott's wiry frame and ran back to the others, Walt and his fellow douchebags momentarily forgotten.

It was impossible to tell who was hurt in that huddling cluster of bodies, not until Claire ducked under Jake's broad frame and pushed aside Enid's trembling shoulders. She found Carl in the middle of that human cocoon. He was the one crying - short, hitching sobs that rocked his whole body, intermingled with incoherent mumbling - sitting on his knees and hunched so low that his long hair spilled on the ground.

There was so much blood.

"Let me see," Claire begged, pawing at his shaking frame. He didn't budge, didn't seem to hear her at all. "Carl, *let me see*."

"Claire," whispered Oliver, suddenly right there. She was about to tell him to get out of the way, *to run*, when he asked, eyes bright and very wide, "Is Judith going to turn?"

Claire rocked back on her heels. Judith's arms, the only part of her that Claire could see, were hanging loose and limp. Claire reached out to touch one small hand, finding it pliant and still warm. Now that the guns were no longer blazing, Jake and Mikey stood back, not knowing

what to do. Enid stayed next to Carl, rubbing his back gently, speaking softly. He didn't seem to even know she was there.

"Cas?" Claire called to him, voice coming away impossibly small. Blinking back tears, she looked up, seeing that Castiel was already making his way to them. But in the process, he had turned his back to Walt. Claire called out again, this time loudly in warning, "Cas!"

Walt sneered, wasting no time taking advantage of Castiel's distraction. The knife gleamed silver in the sunlight when he held it up, poised to stab Castiel in the back. But before he could, another gunshot pierced through the air. Walt stumbled, blood trickling from his brow. He looked around, confused, before dropping face first to the ground, still holding on to the knife.

Scott seemed at ease holding the bearded man's discarded rifle. "Look behind you," he told the remaining men, calm despite the fact that he was outgunned and outnumbered.

Claire gasped.

They came through the smoke, moaning and snarling as they caught sight of the living. The men turned around to face the walkers, most of them switching to their knives or blunt weapons. They'd wasted too many bullets in their earlier panic. Claire wondered if they were even a little relieved to be fighting something they actually knew how to beat.

It was difficult to tell how many there were. One of the walkers wore a long, ratty dress. The fabric at its feet was smoking. Then it caught fire. In a matter of seconds, the creature was engulfed in a nightmarish, flaming shroud. It didn't seem to care.

One of the men, a thick armed brute, was right in the walker's path. Recoiling from the flames, the man tried to fire his pistol. It gave a couple of useless clicks. Too late, the man realized that he'd run out of bullets. He screamed when the walker descended on him with teeth and fire. He continued screaming up until Scott fired another shot, letting him out of his misery.

Claire scrambled to her feet as more and more walkers started to appear. "Oliver, you stay behind me." She said, then looked at Castiel questioningly, finding that he wasn't paying the walkers the slightest bit of attention. He had knelt down in Claire's vacated spot, taking Carl by the shoulders. Carl's back straightened by Castiel's gentle prompting. "What are you going to do?" she demanded, throat constricting at the sight of Judith.

Castiel didn't answer, and didn't have to, because Claire knew damn well what he was going to do. And Claire was terrified. And not because of the strangers or even the walkers. Because Castiel said. *He said*. Back on the ship, that healing was too dangerous. That he didn't have enough control. That he would've killed her had he tried.

But Judith... God, was there even anything *left* to fix?

Claire almost missed the walker landing practically on top of her. She moved out of the way just in time, snapping down and finishing it off before it could stand properly.

"They're everywhere!" Mikey said hurriedly. He had his pocket knife in his hand, the only weapon he had on him when the van had crashed.

He was right. The men were almost by their sides, backing up from the walkers coming at them through the smoke and fire. More came from above, coming down at them from the high ground bracketing the underpass. It wasn't a herd, but single units drawn in by the one-sided firefight.

Another walker made a grab at her, broken jaw snapping grotesquely. Claire dodged its grasping hands, sending her blade upwards and slicing through its brittle skull. She hissed, glancing back and seeing a cluster coming their way from farther down the road. They were trapped. The next walker she faced was tougher, newly dead, and Claire struggled with it for a moment until she managed to push it away, shoving it toward Jake, who batted at it with his crowbar.

"We can't keep this up for much longer," Jake said without pausing to rest, swinging at the next in line.

Claire agreed but couldn't say so, mouth shut tight on account of a spray of rotted blood. Another dead body fell to her feet. She couldn't spare a moment to glance at Castiel. She also couldn't help but think that a herd would've been easier to deal with. At least then you knew where it was coming from.

She was going for the next one, a once tall, heavyset man who was now a tall, heavyset *dead man*, when a thought rang in her head:

*Close your eyes*.

She couldn't disobey, despite *feeling* the walker's rancid moan hitting her right in the face. Her eyes slammed shut on their own.

Light erupted behind her eyelids. The ground shook beneath her feet. The wind shrieked in her ears. Claire dropped to her knees. And prayed.

It ended abruptly. For several long moments, Claire heard nothing but the ringing in her ears. She stayed on the ground, chest heaving, eyes squeezed shut. Her eyes snapped open when she heard Carl's hitching sobs... and saw him staring down at Judith.

Judith, who was very much alive, and looking up at her brother with a bewildered expression.

The walkers and the men who attacked them were all dead. Bodies littered the road as far as Claire could see, mouths opened in a death snarl, eyeholes burnt black and sizzling. Claire had seen this sort of thing before. Only, last time, it had been demons. She also remembered, in the slippery sort of way one would remember a dream, as *they* - Castiel in Claire's body - burned the demons from the inside out. When it was over, *they* turned to her father, slumped and bleeding on the ground…

Claire shook off the memory as she half crawled over the bodies, until she was kneeling by Carl's side once again. She lifted her hand, tentatively, resting it on Judith's fragile chest. Her

shirt, the pretty one with the pink and yellow elephants, was in tatters and absolutely covered in blood. More of it than Claire would have thought Judith had in her. But the skin underneath was whole.

Carl watched Claire's hand moving. He was taking short, gasping breaths. The bandage on his face was drenched in Judith's blood.

"You were dead," Carl informed Judith in a hoarse whisper. A tear slid down his face to land on her cheek. Judith reached out to touch it. Then, eyebrows scrunched, reached up to run her fingers on Carl's wet face. He flinched, repeating, "You were dead."

"*Cal*," Judith mumbled in her childish drawl, patting Carl's tear-streaked face. Then, repeating his often spoken words back at him: "Don't cry."

Carl's face crumbled. Judith wriggled, whining in protest, when Carl suddenly drew her to his chest, crying harder than ever before.

"Holy shit," Enid said quietly, meeting Claire's eyes. She stroked the back of Carl's head, her eyes glittering and wide in amazement.

"Holy shit," Claire agreed, grinning. "He did it." Her smile died when she realized Castiel wasn't actually there. For a moment, she was afraid that she would find him as just another body on the ground, empty vessel burnt from the inside out. Then she spotted him making his way down the road. "Wait here," she told the others, standing up.

Castiel wasn't running away as much as he was stumbling, every step an obvious effort, using one of the stone walls for support. He didn't stop when Claire called out his name, not even when she caught up with him.

"Cas," she said, huffing, "where are you going?"

Castiel's strength gave out. With a grunt, he sank down to his hands and knees. Claire reached out to touch his shoulder. Suddenly, he lashed out at her, shoving her back with aggressive strength.

"Ow! What the hell?" Claire hissed, rubbing her sore elbow.

"Get back," Castiel said gruffly, still on his knees, facing away from her. He held up one hand to stave her off, and she was startled to see that his skin was almost translucent, veins pulsing with light. "*Get away from me*."

"Cas-"

"*I said get back*!"

He groaned and the ground shook. Claire stopped where she stood, riding the tremors and counting the passing seconds until it ended.

"Okay," she released a breath she didn't realize she was holding. "I'm staying right here, okay?"

Castiel didn't reply. Claire watched, helplessly, as he scrabbled at the ground, cement crumbling in his hands. As if he was trying to find purchase, some sort of an anchor.

"What's wrong with him?" she heard Carl say, alarmed.

Claire looked over her shoulder, not surprised to find the others had come running at the first sign of trouble. Even Carl, who looked faint and absolutely terrified, clutching a restless Judith to his chest, had come. Claire met his wide-eyed gaze, swallowed, and made an urgent gesture, motioning to all of them that they needed to stand back. Then she turned her attention back to Castiel.

"Cas, I'm not… I'm not coming any closer." Praying she wasn't doing him any more harm, Claire began to babble, going off on just a hunch. "I'm still right here, alright? You need to focus on my voice, now. I'm right here. Cas. *Cas*. I'm not leaving you." Her voice broke a little when he suddenly cried out in pain, still clutching at the ground. "*Breathe*, Cas. Just, breathe. You can do this, I know you can. You saved Judith, *you did it*. She's gonna want to say thanks. And… think about Dean! Just think. Your boyfriend's gonna be *so mad* if you blow up. You don't want that, do you? So, please don't do that. You better not do that, Cas. *Castiel*. Do you hear me? Pull it together, come on-"

Slowly, Castiel's frantic spasms subsided. The little flashes of light that burned Claire's retinas were becoming less frequent. It was *working*.

Encouraged, Claire persisted, "You're doing great, Cas. Keep focusing on me. That's it, you got it. I'm not leaving you. I swear, I'm not going anywhere. Focus on me. *On me*. Deep breaths-"

Claire didn't even notice the thrumming energy in the air until it suddenly died down. Castiel's shoulders lost their tension before he sagged, falling on his front. Heart caught in her throat, Claire closed the distance between them, falling to her knees besides his prone body.

She turned turned him over so that he was lying on his back instead. He seemed heavier like this, motionless. His clothes were riddled with tears and his skin was flaked with blood, with more of it staining his new coat and white shirt. But just like Judith, his skin was whole and unblemished. In fact, there wasn't a single mark on him. No bullet holes, not so much as a bruise. He was, however, far too still.

"*Cas*," Claire choked on his name when she held out a trembling hand in front of his face and didn't feel a puff of breath. Checking his pulse yielded similar results. "Where did the all the bullets even go?" she wondered, almost hysterically. "Did you eat them?" She hit his chest with her fist. "Cas, come on. Don't you dare be dead. Don't you dare. You don't get to do this to me. Wake up, *you bastard*."

She hit him again and almost screamed when he suddenly coughed, spitting up blood. "Ohmigod, I'm so sorry!" she said when he blinked up at her in confusion, ragged breaths settling. "Cas?" she asked, but his eyes were fluttering shut once more. "Cas!"

He was breathing, though. Definitely breathing.

"You-" Claire settled back on her haunches, sighing- "*holy shit*."

Chapter End Notes

How about that SPN finale, y'all? Walt and Roy even had a cameo. Am I psychic, or what?

# Grim Reaping

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Claire sensed the other kids' approach, their apprehension. "It's okay, he's just knocked out," she called without turning, unable to look away from Castiel. "He's alive," she added quietly, as if reassuring herself.

It seemed so quiet now, after all the violence. Claire's eyes ached, uncomfortably dry despite the rising lump in her throat. *Crisis averted*, she thought, numbed with relief. If she ignored the blood and the fact that he was lying in a road, Castiel almost looked like he was sleeping. He *never* slept; Claire had never thought to appreciate that about him. It made him look younger, a lot more like Jimmy Novak.

Claire didn't expect to be tackled from behind in a hug that would rock her forward on her knees. Long, dark hair spilled down Claire's front when Enid tucked her chin over Claire's shoulder and squeezed her tightly.

"Hey," Claire said in a shaky voice, lifting a hand to pat Enid's arm. "What's up?"

Enid laughed quietly, sounding a vibration against Claire's back. "Not much. You?" She pulled back until she was kneeling next to Claire, a steadying presence at her side. Enid's expression wavered when she got a closer look at Castiel. "*Holy shit.* They shot him. Like, *a lot*."

Claire turned her head at the sound of shuffling footsteps. The others drew closer, their shadows looming over the unconscious Castiel. "It looks worse than it is," Claire said, feeling uneasy by their frightened expressions. "Carl," she called, trying to catch his eye, "are you okay?"

Carl looked pretty far from okay, actually. He was staring at Castiel with a dazed expression, the blood-stained bandage on his face accentuating his paleness. Judith sat against his hip, painted red but without signs of discomfort except confusion. The was no trace of the angry wound that had only recently gaped through her chest and neck. It wasn't a sight Claire would soon forget.

"Not really," Carl said plainly.

"*Cash,*" Judith spoke up suddenly. "Ca-aal, Cash!" The two-year-old pointed at Castiel with a stubby finger, slurring his name as usual. She wriggled in a way that said she wanted to be let down *right now*.

Her squirming seemed to pull Carl out of his daze. "Hey, hey, Judy. Calm down," he said gently, rocking her a little. "Cas can't play right now. He's sleeping." His lower lip wobbled. Then his breath hitched, almost in a sob. Looking straight at Claire, he asked, "He brought her back, didn't he?"

Claire nodded slowly.

"I think he's healed," Enid announced, moving Castiel coat lapel to uncovered more of the blood splattered shirt underneath. Her hand hovered over his chest before she tentatively peeled back a strip of fabric. "There's not a mark on him," she murmured, not sounding surprised at all. "Still, what a bunch of assholes."

"*Dead assholes*," Jake pointed out, frowning down at their unconscious friend. "Cas, you are one scary mother-"

"Leave him alone," said Claire harshly. Her eyes seemed to be drawn to the blood splatter on Castiel's cheek. Bits of gravel were stuck to it from when he had collapsed on the road before she managed to roll him over. "Goddammit," Claire whispered, struck by a sudden rush of anger. Pulling her sleeve over her hand, she began to swipe at his skin. "This was never supposed to happen," she said through gritted teeth. "He is *not okay* and he's not *supposed* to do anything stupid like blasting or *healing*-"

Enid caught Claire's hand. "I don't think that's helping."

"Sorry," Claire breathed. She glanced at Carl, finding him looking absolutely stricken. "Sorry," she repeated, almost in a whisper. "I'm glad Judith's okay. I am."

Then, to her horror, she burst into tears.

Claire stood up on shaky legs and turned her back to the others, covering her eyes so she wouldn't have to see them looking at her like she'd lost her damn mind. A hand touched her shoulder. Claire flinched, shrugging off the comforting gesture like it burned her. "Don't touch me," she said thickly, taking a shuddering breath to keep herself from sobbing. "You don't get it - this is all my fault."

"It's really not," Enid was quick to say.

"It is," Claire insisted, squeezing the bridge of her nose. Still the tears kept on coming. "All of it. I could've stopped the car and *I didn't*. And then Judith almost died and Cas almost died and we lost all our stuff..."

"That's not on you," said Carl quietly, giving her pause. "I distracted you."

Claire turned to look him in the eye. "No," she said, horrified. "I should've paid more attention to the road. If I wasn't driving so damn fast-"

"You were just trying to get us home," Carl protested, shaking his head helplessly. "I shouldn't have been so pushy about it."

"I *saw* the damn spikes-"

"Oh, will you stop?" said Enid sharply. She stood with her hands on her hips, glaring at Carl and Claire in turn. "It was a freakin' ambush! You wanna play the blame game? Fine, I'll give you a hint:" her voice adopted a mocking gruff intonation when she quoted, "'Take the girls.'"

She huffed, aggravated. "Give me a break. *We're alive.* We survived and we're gonna keep on surviving. You got that?"

Claire sniffed pitifully. "I don't think you'll make it home for dinner."

Enid rolled her eyes. "Don't be an idiot."

They all startled when a nearby corpse began to jerk and twitch. Oliver jumped away from it, dropping the stick he was holding in surprise. The walker, a pitiful-looking thing in nothing but a pair of soiled boxers, continued to spasm for several moments before settling, a buildup of hissing steam escaping from one of its ruined eye sockets.

"Ewww," said Oliver, suitably impressed.

"*Jesus Christ*," Jake said loudly, looking at the walker in undisguised horror.

"Pretty sure it was all Cas," Scott mumbled.

"Bite me, Scotty," Jake said before he turned to her. "Claire, what *was* that?" He spread his arms in a pointed gesture, indicating the bodies scattered about the road. The air smelled prominently of burnt flesh. "What *the fuck* happened to their heads?"

Claire returned Jake's expectant glare with wet eyes. "How should I know?" she demanded. She might have seen this sort of thing before (had *done* this sort of thing before, in a way), but she had no actual explanation besides 'oh, an angel did it'.

"You're the expert on Cas-stuff," Jake shot back.

"What? Did I grow wings all of a sudden?" Claire threw her arms out, exasperated. "*I don't know*. It's just-" she shook her head, braid flying- "*a thing* he does."

"*A thing*?"

"Guys," Mikey said, stepping up between them, face pale under his dark hair. "Can we freak out about this *later*?" His eyes darted around nervously. "This doesn't look like the safest place to be right now."

"He's not wrong," Enid said. "That blast probably bought us some time, but we're sitting ducks. We can't just wait here till Cas wakes up." Her expression turned thoughtful. "Hey, do you think the assholes had a car?" She moved to look in the direction their attackers had come from, past the crash site. "I could take a quick look."

Claire frowned, following Enid's line of sight. The fire was still going strong, gas spill spreading across the road and blocking anyone from going in that direction. If their attackers had a vehicle, it could only be on the other side of that fire blockade. But stepping through the fire would be suicide.

Going *around*, however…

"How do you plan on getting there?" Jake asked, raising an eyebrow.

Enid grinned. "Boost me up?" She touched one of the stone walls that lined the road.

"Figures," Jake sighed before stepping up to the task. "Come along, squirrel."

"Enid," Claire called the moment Enid had the high ground. Her voice was still a little wobbly from crying. "You get *five minutes*, so don't go too far. And be careful!" Enid gave her a thumbs up before disappearing over the edge.

"We should check the bodies for supplies. Guns, too," said Scott, fingering the strap of the rifle he had picked up. "I don't think they used up all the ammo."

"I'll stay here," Carl said. "Watch over Cas."

"Jake, keep him company?" Claire asked. Jake rolled his eyes but didn't argue. Claire turned to Oliver. "You too, kiddo," she said, ruffling the boy's hair. "You're in charge till I get back."

Grabbing Mikey and Scott by their shirts, she pulled them along until they were fumbling after her on their own, Mikey a little less enthusiastically than Scott. It was a short walk down the trench road to where the majority of the corpses were. Claire remembered that in the early days, looting bodies had been frowned upon. Now, it was a matter of course.

They didn't bother checking the walkers. Most looked like they'd been dead for quite some time. It was easy to tell the bodies apart, anyway. For starters, their *living* attackers hadn't had the chance to decay yet. On top of that, they were all heavily tattooed. Kind of badly, too, in Claire's humble opinion.

"You don't think they'll turn, do you?" Mikey asked, scrunching his nose at one of the fresh cadavers.

"Nah," said Claire from her perch over her own corpse. The eyes were a twisted, burnt mess. "It worked on the walkers, didn't it? I think their brains are mush." Just to confirm, Claire drew her blade and shoved it through the dead man's skull. It burst open, spilling black goo on the asphalt. Claire grimaced. "Case in point."

The next body Claire inspected didn't have the same burnt out eyes. Instead, the man appeared to have died from a bullet to the back of the head. Claire frowned, realizing that it must have been Scott's doing. In fact, a few of the men appeared to have died that way. At the time, Claire had thought the gunshots had been the men firing at the walkers, but now it appeared that while the rest of them were taking out the dead, Scott had kept his focus on the living

Claire looked at Scott, puzzled. "Not that I'm complaining, but…"

"You don't waste bullets on the *dead*," said Scott, matter of factly. "These guys," he jerked his chin at one of the shot corpses, "they were making a run for it." He shrugged. "I figured, if they weren't helping us take out the dead ones, least they could do was keep them distracted. Y'know, as grub?"

"This is freaky," said Mikey, raising his voice to get their attention. "Check this out. I think these guys were, like, Satanists."

The body he was looking over was easily recognizable - it was missing most of its head (the reddish beard remained mostly intact). Like the rest, the body was covered in chicken scratch tattoos. Mikey used his pocket knife to point out a particular one, half hidden in the ruddy chest hairs that poked above the man's dirty wifebeater.

"That's a pentagram, right?" Mikey said, squinting. "It's like a cult or something; they've all got the same tattoos."

"They're not Satanists - they're *hunters*," Claire said in realization, peering at the familiar design. "Monster hunters," she clarified, "Sam and Dean are ones, too. I guess it explains why this asshole kept going on about silver." Scowling, she gave the body a little kick. "They're supposed to be the *good guys*."

"I don't know, Claire," Mikey said, pulling his shoulders. "They really panicked."

"Not this dude," said Scott, jutting his chin to indicate the body sprawled at their feet. "And there was that one other, the guy who tried to stab Cas in the back…"

"Walt," Claire recalled, nodding. "Nice shooting, by the way."

"Thanks." Scott ducked his head shyly.

Mikey gestured at the tattoo again. "So, this is what, a badge of honor?"

"Anti-possession tattoo," Claire said, shaking her head. "My mom had one." She considered the crudely etched symbol. No doubt, it was the same design her mother had worn. Same five-point star, same little 'sun' around the edges. But the inkwork was sloppy, unlike her mother's discreet little tattoo.

"Your mom hunted monsters?" Scott asked, eyebrows rising.

"No, but she got possessed once." And wasn't that the Novak family curse. She clarified, "By a demon."

Claire had only met Sam and Dean that one time. That was when she had last seen her father alive (if not in the flesh). The Winchesters hadn't stuck around long, but they'd left Amelia Novak with a sketch of the demon warding. For that, at least, Claire was grateful. Amelia had breathed a little easier after getting the ink done. Even though her own mother, Claire's deeply religious grandma, had thrown a fit.

"I was supposed to get one just like it when I turned sixteen," Claire mused out loud. Except that by then, the world had ended. In the grand scale of looming threats, *dead people with cravings* took precedence over *demonic possession*.

"What about the rest of these?" Mikey continued frowning at the hunter's strange tattoos. "Do they mean anything?"

"It just looks like chicken scratches to me." Claire shrugged. "Cas would know."

Scott perked. "We'll show him when he wakes up. Mike, d'you still have that notepad?"

"It's *Mikey*," he said emphatically, sighing. "And yeah." Mikey pulled a small notepad and a little pen from his back pocket. He ripped the first two pages off, tossing them over his shoulder before handing the items to Scott. "I guess I don't need it, now that we've lost our inventory." He pouted.

It felt a little skeevy, but they tore off the headless asshole's wifebeater and overshirt so Scott could get a better look at the designs stretching across his chest, arms and protruding belly. Tongue poking out of his mouth in concentration, Scott quickly sketched out the different symbols, keeping them more or less true to form. Proportional, even.

"Got it. Now, turn him around. See if he's got more on his back," Scott said. He was proven right - the tattoos went all the way down the man's back, disappearing past his waistline. After a pause, Scott added, "Pants and underwear, too."

"Dude," said Mikey, aghast.

"What?" Scott argued. "It might be *important*." To himself, he muttered. "Better damn hope it's important."

While Scott creeped, Claire went to get Walt's silver knife. On closer inspection, it didn't look much like Claire's own angel blade. It was long and silver, but had a duller, matte finish and a jagged edge. Claire decided to show it to Castiel anyway, as there were runes etched on the base. Turning Walt's body around, she took his holster and sidearm too.

"We really have to go," Claire said, standing back up. "Where the hell is Enid?"

The sound of a speeding vehicle made all three startle. They jumped out of the way just as an ugly beige pickup truck shoved past the wreckage, the metal on the truck's side screeching in protest when it checked the burning metal husk. Claire caught a glimpse of long dark hair in the driver's seat when the truck rushed past them. The truck trampled over the bodies in its path before it pulled to a rough stop.

"Enid, what the hell?" Claire demanded, picking herself off the ground. "You could've killed yourself with that stunt!"

"But I didn't!" said Enid, grinning as she all but tumbled out of the driver's seat. She pointed at the fire. "Holy shit, did you guys see that? Not bad for a first timer, huh?"

Scott blinked at her. "You can't drive?"

"Um, I think I just *did*."

"*I think* I'm going to kill you." Claire said and threw her arms around Enid in a hug. Enid just laughed.

They wasted no time taking off after loading the truck. They grabbed what they could off the bodies, but it wasn't much; there were plenty of guns, but hardly any ammo was left. Castiel had remained stubbornly unconscious even as they carried him into the back of the pickup. Claire didn't hesitate to settle beside him, all too happy to leave the driving to Jake. Enid, Scott and Carl took to the back as well (the latter managing to bring himself to drop Judith in Mikey's lap in the truck's front passenger seat, squeezed together with Oliver who was none too happy about not getting a ride in the open).

Traveling in the back of a pickup truck had seemed like a refreshing change at first. They barely managed an hour before they were missing their van. It might have been crowded and stifling, but at least it had kept a roof over their heads. By noon, it was clearly turning out to be an exceptionally hot day. And while the heat was kept at bay by the wind, it didn't stop them from soaking up the sun.

"I miss my hat," Carl grumbled loudly, holding a hand over his face for a tiny bit of shade. His skin had already adopted a rosy tint.

Enid was sitting shoulder to shoulder with Scott, peering at the little notepad he had in his hands. "Hunters, huh?" Enid said, her long hair whipping about her face. They had already recounted their discovery to the others. "Some of these kind of look like the ones we drew in McLaren."

"What, the wards?" Claire glanced down at Castiel.

Carl frowned in consideration. "You think that's what spooked Cas earlier? If they've got their place mojo'd up like this, would he be able to tell? He said something about not liking the neighborhood."

Claire snickered. "Oh, I'm pretty sure Cas likes hunters alright."

"I'm pretty sure I don't," Carl said, snorting.

"I saw more of them," Enid blurted out. "Hunters, I mean. When I was out getting the truck. They never saw me," she added quickly, holding up a hand to stop Claire from asking. "There were walkers coming up the hill - they had their hands full."

Claire's mouth thinned. "*Good*."

They drove for another hour or so, just in the general direction of Alexandria, stopping often to search for supplies. There was little to be found. It appeared that the whole area had been picked clean. It didn't help that the truck seemed to be on its last legs, dashboard lighting up like a Christmas tree and engine grunting and heaving alarmingly.

"No food, no water," Claire complained loudly, sitting cross-legged in the pickup's bed. Loose strands of her hair kept flying into her eyes. "And we're practically running on fumes. Those *cheap motherfuckers*."

"And no air conditioning!" Jake shouted at them from the driver's seat.

They almost missed the sign for the freshwater lake. It was a good thing they hadn't, as the lake itself was quite small and not at all visible from the main road. Following the unpaved road as directed by the sign, they endure the slap of overgrown tree branches with the promise of cool fresh water. Their luck held out: they got all the way down to the end of the trail before the truck died out with a final gurgle.

They found themselves in a tranquil little spot, surrounded by trees that created a fair bit of shade while being sparse enough that nothing could really sneak up on them. The lake itself was closer to a large pond, with a rocky shoreline and a wooden pier that just begged to be used as a jumping board.

"Oh, check it out," said Claire, focusing on what she had initially assumed to be shrubbery but was actually a trailer covered in vines and a heavy camouflage tarp. They circled the trailer for signs of any recent human presence. The windows were all boarded shut, the nails rusting. A fire pit near the trailer showed no sign of having been recently lit. Claire nudged a dented metal pot with her shoe. "I don't think anyone lives here anymore."

"Look," said Jake, lifting another tarp to reveal fishing supplies. "Hook, line and sinker." He pulled up a fishing rod, grinning. "Literally."

While the others combed the surrounding area, Claire and Carl took the task of rummaging through the trailer's contents. The lone walker inside didn't give them too much trouble, despite having once been an unusually large man (with a rather obvious bite wound on his neck).

"Just - crap," Claire said with a sigh, closing the little pantry door with a little too much force. The owner had been something of a hoarder, they discovered. Unfortunately, there was very little they could do with horse-shaped figurines and an unholy-sized collection of empty liquor bottles. The stuffy smell and the heat inside the trailer was giving her a headache. "No first-aid kit or anything, either, and um, Carl..." she turned to look at him, hesitating a little.

Carl stopped rummaging through the dead man's closet long enough to look at her questioningly. The blood that had soaked through his bandage had turned a dark brown. "What?"

"You've got to take that off. It might get infected," Claire finished reluctantly, motioning at her own face.

"Yeah," Carl said after a moment had passed. His face tilted away, he reached up to peel off the soiled bandage, wincing when the medical tape pulled at his skin. "The doc said I gotta start airing it out, anyway," he added with forced confidence.

"It's not that bad," Claire said immediately, wincing inwardly at how insincere she sounded. In truth, it did look pretty damn awful, even half-hidden under his long hair. Carl's eye was just… gone, leaving a scarred, angry red hole behind. Oddly, it looked somewhat like the messed up bodies they had left stranded on the road.

Carl snorted. "Come on, I don't think we'll find anything else in here."

A noticeable hush fell over the group the moment Carl and Claire stepped outside with their meager loot.

"No bandages," Carl said tersely, dropping a backpack full of oversized clothing at his feet. "Judith's still asleep, right?" he asked unnecessarily, as the toddler was obviously still snoozing in Mikey's lap.

"Dude," said Jake, staring openly despite the pointed glares Claire was sending his way. "When can you stop covering that shit with bandages, anyway? We should find you a real eye-patch. Like, with crossbones and everything. It'll look so freaking *badass*." He pressed on when Carl didn't say anything, "Eye-patch, man! Like Captain Hook."

"Jake," Carl said hesitantly, like he wasn't sure if Jake was making fun of him. "Hook was missing *a hand*."

"Pirates got eye-patches," Jake said stubbornly. "Just think about how cool you're gonna look. Or, you know, whatever. I'm kind of digging the cyclops chic, too." He shrugged. "What are y'all staring at, anyway? You've seen a hell of a lot worse. Look at Claire, she's got walker gunk *in her hair*."

Carl glanced at Claire, who fingered her stiff braid with a grimace. "You do have some gunk in your hair," he said, mouth twitching. His head was held a little higher when he turned back to Jake. "I guess I could wear an eye-patch. Just... no crossbones."

Jake hooted in triumph. "*Awesome*. We'll keep an eye out for you." He was about to return to his task of fixing up the fishing rod when he realized what he had said and began to snicker. "Keep an eye out. Get it?"

Carl punched him in the shoulder. But not very hard.

Chapter End Notes

EXHAUSTED! Sorry the updates are coming slowly, you guys. I really appreciate everyone who follows this story - your feedback is a great motivator. Thank you so much!

# The F Word

Chapter Notes

So… It's been a few years since my last update. I'm not sure if I should offer an apology.

I've started this story back in 2017, during what had probably been the most difficult period in my life. My sister passed away after a long battle with cancer, and I realize now that I was using this piece to work through my grief. I guess that's why family is so central to the story, angels and zombies aside.

I've let it go for a while, but the story still lived on in my brain. I just couldn't get the words out, somehow. Now I'm once again going through a rough patch - nobody's dying this time, thank God - but I figured, writing has helped me before - why not pick up where I left off?

I know there are probably very few people reading this, especially after all this time, but it's good just to get it out there. There's so much more to tell! I know I'm not that much of a writer, but maybe I can still tell a good story.

I'm going to try for regular updates in the upcoming weeks. If you're reading this - I appreciate it. Thank you.

Reminder - continuity wise, the story picks up around TWD mid-season 6, right around when the Saviors plotline picked up. Cas and "his kids" were on their way to Alexandria when they stumbled on a group of walkers and got stranded.

It was a scorching hot day.

Enid wore her tan-colored jumpsuit zipped down to the waist, with the sleeves tied around her middle. She liked the jumpsuit. Enough to have washed it a few times already, though there was not much she could do about the paint splatters. The jumpsuit was comfortable and came with deep pockets.

In a kinder world, Enid would have filled those pockets with snacks, fit for a trek in the woods on a hot and sunny day. She would have carried fresh water sealed in a leakproof bottle, a fat tube of sunscreen, and top-of-the-line mosquito repellent.

In a kinder world, she wouldn’t have a rash building up from excess underboob sweat.

Their world wasn't particularly kind, but that was all right. Her pockets had plenty of room for the black walnuts she and Carl were picking off the forest floor, plus however many they could fit into Carl’s backpack.

Enid had expected a token of resistance when she’d dragged Carl away from the others. Everyone was still so riled up after all the drama, and they had only just begun to settle in their lakeside camp. Carl had joined her easily enough, however, leaving Judith in their friends’ care.

It had been one hell of a day. They’d lost their ride and most of their supplies in an ambush, surviving only thanks to Castiel’s unique brand of justice. Saving their lives had come with a cost, since Castiel had crashed *hard* afterward, and they’d left a big, conspicuous mess behind them.

Luckily, they had managed to put some distance between them and whatever was left of their poor van. With a bit more luck, they’d be able to lay low long enough for Castiel to recover.

The fresh air was a nice change, at least. The woods were quiet, save for some chirping insects and the wind rustling among the trees. Enid and her friends had spent far too long cooped up in the old van, bumping elbow and teetering with every bump in the road.

Enid picked up another black walnut off the ground. She grimaced at her stained hands. She knew it would only get grosser once they dehusked and boiled the things. Black walnuts were messy.

“I don’t know, Enid. They look kind of rotten,” Carl said. He crouched a few feet away from her, inspecting a pile of black and green balls. “Are you sure we can eat them?”

“Totally,” Enid replied cheerfully, thumping her bulging pocket. Walking back to camp was going to be awkward as hell, but it was going to be worth it. “I used to pick these up with my dad all the time. I’m surprised you haven’t, what with your gardening thing and all.”

“We grew *food*,” Carl grumbled.

“This *is* food.” Enid rolled her eyes. “You gotta cook ‘em, and um, my dad liked to dry them out first, but they should still be alright without.” Apologetic, she added, “Just maybe a *teeny-tiny-bit* mushy.”

Carl snorted. “Sounds delicious.”

Enid shrugged. Mushy walnuts weren’t her idea of a snack, either, but she could cope without too much whining. It wasn’t as though they could afford to be too picky.

Of all days to miss breakfast! It happened in spite of Castiel’s usual insistence (“I’ve been reliably informed that breakfast is the most important meal of the day, Enid.”)

It was only one meal. It wasn’t like they were starving.

But they *were* hungry, and it was going to get worse.

They were supposed to be on their way to Alexandria, not scrambling for supplies in the middle of nowhere. But whether they liked it or not, circumstances had left them stranded - with two young children in their care. They simply couldn’t afford to tiptoe toward real hunger.

Enid managed to squeeze one more walnut into her pocket before closing the flap. “We’re gonna need to figure out how to crack them open. We used to run them over with the car, but I’m not sure the truck’s up to it.” She mused. They had stolen a truck off their attackers before the piece of shit had died on them too. “Cas probably could’ve helped with that,” she said, making a crushing gesture with her fist.

“We can always crack them against Jake’s head. His skull’s thick enough,” Carl joked as he stood, zipping his backpack closed. “I think that’s all I can carry. Do you wanna head back to camp?”

Enid sighed. There was actually another reason why she’d asked Carl to come foraging with her. A reason that didn’t have anything to do with walnuts.

That morning, the twins had offered a disturbing piece of information. Apparently, they’d belonged to the same group Alexandria had gone against most recently, as part of the deal to get supplies from the Hilltop people.

The Saviors.

Enid didn’t know much about them. She didn’t care to. When Rick had called a town meeting to talk about a possible deal with Hilltop, Enid hadn’t been invited. Nor was Carl. The adults hadn’t wanted them to know all the gory details.

It didn’t mean she didn’t know. At least, she knew the rough outline. Alexandria had “taken care” of the Saviors, in exchange for food and supplies. Whatever that meant - it hadn’t been pretty. Enid knew it had hit Glenn particularly hard. Whatever Glenn had seen, whatever he had to do, he wasn’t at peace with it. And maybe the twins wouldn’t be, either.

After a long sigh, Enid said, “Actually, there is something I wanted to talk to you about.”

Carl’s head tilted her way. It was something he’d taken on doing more and more often since he’d lost his eye. “You want to talk about the Saviors.” He smiled a little at her look of surprise. “I figured you didn’t drag me all the way out here for walnuts.”

“It’s complicated,” Enid said, unhappily, shifting from one foot to the next. “I- look, Carl. I hate to say it, but we may need to rethink Jake and Scott coming to Alexandria.”

Carl looked as though she’d slapped him.

“Nothing’s changed,” he said tersely before pushing past her, back toward camp.

Enid grabbed his arm. “Carl-”

Carl came to a stop but shook his arm out of her grip. He turned around to face her, for once not slating to hide his injured side. “Jesus, Enid. They’re Scott and Jake. They’re our friends. More than that, they’re *family*. After everything - after *everything* we’ve been through together - you want to cut them loose *now* ?”

“Of course not! They’re my friends too. But, Carl-”

“What? Do you really think I would’ve left Judith back there with them if I didn’t *trust* them?”

“Will you just listen-”

“And how come you didn’t ask Mikey out here? Hmm? He’s from Alexandria, too. Doesn’t he get a vote?”

“It’s not about *who gets a vote,* dumbass. ” Enid shoved him. Not very hard, but enough to shut him up. “It’s about Rick.”

Carl’s angry frown melted to confusion. “My dad-”

“Scares the shit out of me,” Enid interrupted, holding Carl’s gaze.

Carl, caught off guard, took a step back. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

A gust of wind rustled the branches overhead. In spite of the heat, Enid shivered under Carl's accusatory glare. But she refused to back down. It wasn't a lie. Enid had been wary of Rick Grimes since the beginning. Ever since he'd pummeled Ron's dad before freaking out at Deanna, unhinged and covered in blood, waving his gun around, till Michonne finally had to knock him out.

As gently as she could, Enid tried to explain. "Look, Carl, your dad's-" disturbed, psychotic, *off his nut*, "-not all the way there. You said so yourself." She gazed at Carl evenly, willing him to understand. "And we've been gone a *long time* ."

Carl frowned. "So what? We've taken in all sorts of people before, even Tara was-" He shook his head. "I mean, it's not like the twins even *liked* the Saviors. They *wanted* to leave."

"But they *didn't*, Carl." Enid pointed out, not unkindly. The creature who'd abducted them all might've done Jake and Scott a favor, but it wasn't like they had actually run away from the Saviors. "They got taken away. Just Like us."

Carl's mouth thinned unhappily. "So it's like that."

Enid wanted to scream in frustration. "It's *not* that. Look, the Saviors… I heard Maggie talking. Before we left. She wanted to put up extra guards, more patrols. She was worried. *Everyone* was worried. They thought the Saviors might hit us back. So when we disappeared, when you and Judith suddenly vanished, who do you think got the blame?"

"We don't even know there are any Saviors *left* ."

"But if there are? Whatever happened with Hilltop was bad enough. What if, since we've been gone, your dad's on a rampage? What if he's picked up an all-out-war with the Saviors?" She grimaced. "And yeah, I know they were shitty people. And Jake, Scott, they wanted to get away from that. With good reason, probably. I mean, Glenn was all torn up about it, coming back from Hilltop."

Carl opened his mouth to speak, but Enid interjected, "And the thing is - the twins, they lived with the Saviors for who knows how long. Maybe there were people there they'd actually

cared about? People they *don't* want to see getting burned alive? *Don't you think they deserve to know what kind of shit they're walking into* ?"

A heavy silence hung between them. Finally, Carl nodded. "I'll talk to them."

Enid eyed him warily. "You'll talk to them?"

"Jake and Scott. You're right, they deserve to know what happened. I don't know what dad is doing, if there really are any Saviors left… We'll figure it out, whatever happens." He adjusted the grip on his backpack. "That's what you  wanted, isn't it?"

Enid nodded slowly, though her stomach sank.

They trudged along in silence back to the camp, leaves crunching under their feet. The conversation went better than she'd expected, but the sick feeling lingered. It was difficult to make sense of.

Enid didn't want to say goodbye to the twins. Or anyone else, for that matter. But maybe that would be for the better?

Carl had said that they were *family*. It was so easy for him to throw that word around - he still had his father, still had his sister. But Enid? She'd already lost the only family she'd ever had.

The telltale sound of a walker's hoarse moan pierced her thoughts. It dragged itself toward them, a pitiful creature with two broken legs and paper-thin skin. Carl ran his blade through its skull with ease. Out of habit, Enid rooted through the dead walker's pockets. There was nothing in there except for an old photograph; a smiling family from another lifetime.

Suddenly exhausted, Enid slumped to the ground beside the dead body.

"You okay?"

“Family, huh?” Enid chucked as she returned the photo to the corpse's pocket.

Carl shrugged. He cleaned his knife with a handful of dry leaves before resheathing it. “You don’t think so?”

Enid bit her lip, contemplative. She definitely felt something for Carl. Claire was her best friend. Glenn and Maggie had taken her under their wing like a little sister. She cared. Of course she cared. More than she wanted to.

But family?

Enid thought of her funny old dad, a middle-aged chemistry teacher who’d used to let his eight-year-old daughter cut his hair, and had gone out to forage for them even though he himself was allergic to nuts. She thought of her fierce mother, the smartest woman she’d ever known, a woman who had worn the ugliest cardigans in all of creation, and had once killed a walker with a nail file.

Enid opened her mouth to tell Carl all that, but instead said, “They were Atheists, you know?”

"Uh, who?"

"My parents.” Enid smiled sadly. “They would’ve really liked Cas.”

“Everyone likes Cas,” Carl replied easily.

Carl sat down too, just on the other side of the carcass. The body smelled like rot and decay, but the smell of death had already permeated everything in their lives. They were used to it.

“It’s stupid,” said Enid. She picked up a small leaf and absentmindedly rolled it between her fingers. “I know there’s an afterlife. I mean, I know it for *a fact*. How many people get to say that and mean it?”

Carl grinned a little. “You know I’m from Georgia, right?”

Enid flicked the leaf at him. “I’m serious! Losing people-”

“I know. It doesn’t make it easier.”

“I don’t know if I can do that anymore,” Enid admitted. “And I feel like we’re walking toward a powder keg, Carl.”

Carl’s jaw tightened. “Yeah, well, world hasn’t changed just ‘cause you did. We’re always walking toward *something* . But you’re still going to keep on surviving. Because that’s who you *are* . You’re a survivor, Enid.” He gave her a raw, open look. “And you *will* lose people again.  And again, and again. That’s just the way it is now. Not… not everyone gets to have miracles.”

Enid reached over the corpse, taking Carl’s hand in her own. “I’m sorry - you’re the one who’s almost lost Judith today, and I’m here being all dumb and weepy.”

Carl smiled softly. “Judith’s been through more scraps than most of us,” he said quietly. “But that was… that…”

The ambush. Judith’s dying in Carl’s arms, her miraculous resurrection. Enemies, dead and alive, dropping like flies all around them.

“It was magic,” said Enid.

And Castiel had paid the price.

Whatever curse Tlaloc had laid on Castiel back at the ship was still very much affecting him. As far as both of them knew, Castiel still hadn't regained consciousness. Enid didn't know what might've happened if Claire hadn't talked Castiel down, right before he'd collapsed, but it obviously could have gone a lot worse.

Enid had a sudden sinking realization.

Bullets didn't hurt Castiel. Scribbles made out of cheap red paint, however, had kept him locked up and immobile for well over a year. And fixing Judith - that had hurt him a lot, too. Getting close to people, to *them* , that was a weakness.

Castiel was an angel, but he wasn't all powerful. And clearly, he wasn't at all invulnerable.

How many people out there knew the right wards, the right spells, the right *weapons* to hurt an angel?

"We can't let anyone find out about him," said Enid, anxiously.

Carl frowned. "Huh?"

Enid told him everything. "Cas - we have to keep him a secret. What he is. Think about it - if people found out what he can do, the wrong people, even *our* people - " people who suffered, lost loved ones, risked getting bit every single time they stepped outside "-imagine what that'll do to him, what *they'll* do to him."

Carl gripped her hand tightly. "We won't let that happen."

Enid said, "We have to protect him."

They sat there in silence for several long minutes, holding hands over a desiccated corpse because neither one of them wanted to be the first to let go. Finally, Carl stood with a sigh, pulling Enid up as well.

“Come on,” said Carl, picking up his backpack that was stuffed full of black walnuts. “Let’s get back to the others. We still need to figure out how to cook these godawful things.”

# Around the Campfire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Claire sat on a threadbare blanket in the shade of a crooked tree. She ran her fingers through her damp hair and watched the fading sunlight paint vivid colors across the horizon. Across the water in the far distance, a lone figure was hanging by a noose, swaying gently in the breeze.

Their campsite stood on a bump of a hill, overlooking the shoreline and much of the surrounding wooded area. It was a quiet little spot, save for the constant soundtrack of nature. Claire could appreciate that now that her ears had finally stopped ringing.

“ *JESUS FUCK!* ”

Claire jumped, startled. She turned toward Mikey. The two of them were alone at the campsite except for the still-unconscious Castiel. Mikey’s boney spine poked through his shirt as he hunched next to the fire pit, cursing up a storm.

Claire sighed. She rose to her feet and approached her friend. “Hey, are you okay? Let me see,” she said, pulling his shoulder.

“I’m fine.” Mikey waved her off, irritably. He shook his burnt hand. “Goddamn dollar-store piece of crap,” he grumbled as he determinedly pulled the bubbling pot out of the fire, managing to set it down to cool without further incident.

Claire rolled her eyes. It wasn’t the first time that day that Mikey had somehow mishandled the dented stew pot they’d been using to boil their drinking water. Or, as he’d called it, “Satan’s Pot.”

It wasn’t something they’d bothered with a day earlier. Not too long ago they had bottled water, preserved food, and a conscious Castiel who didn’t need to eat or drink but had a knack for telling if any nasty microscopic things were swimming around in their rations.

Having to filter and boil their drinking water was a pain in the ass, but then, so was Travellers' Diarrhea. Better safe than very, very sorry.

Claire looked over at where Castiel was laid out on his back, knocked out since their run-in with the hunters that morning. Though he'd "eaten" a few dozen bullets, he didn't have any bruises or injuries as far as Claire could see. Even the mosquitoes seemed to be leaving him the hell alone. Whatever damage he'd done to himself, saving Judith, saving *all* of them - it went beyond the husk of Jimmy Novak.

Claire guessed that the hunters had been aiming at his head when they'd shot him - force of habit, probably - because Castiel's hair looked like a bird's nest. He *looked* absolutely fine, even more now that they'd changed his shirt to something a little less mauled (and boy, hadn't that  been awkward). His color looked okay and his chest kept rising and falling even though Claire had it on good authority it didn't technically need to. Still, he remained stubbornly unconscious.

Claire offered a silent but heartfelt prayer:

*Dear Castiel who art-not in Heaven… you suck.*

To Mikey she said, "Maybe we can find you some aloe for that hand later."

Mikey shot her a glare over his shoulder. "Maybe we can find you some pants later," he retorted.

Claire choked on a laugh, caught off guard. It had been a hot and blood-soaked day. Earlier she had been all too happy to strip down to her bra and underwear and take a running dive into the water. When she'd gotten out, she had thrown on an oversized t-shirt, wearing it like a potato sack while she washed her own clothes and left them to dry.

Claire prodded Mikey with her bare toe. "What are you, Mormon? It's hot. Fuck off."

Mikey stood and turned to her, sighing like she was the unreasonable one. “Holy shitballs, Claire. Will you get over yourself? I meant for safety. You *know* there are handicapped walkers in these woods.” He made a vague gesture toward the underbrush.

“Handicapped walkers,” Claire repeated slowly.

“You know, the lurkers. The ones that haven’t got legs or whatever.” He tapped at his own thigh for emphasis. “It’s safer to keep your pants on. And your shoes.”

“My jeans are still drying,” Claire said, pointing to where her pants were hanging from a branch, wet and still carrying some obvious bloodstains. There was only so much she could do with lakewater and no soap. “But it’s not like they could stop a bite anyway.”

Mikey frowned under his messy bangs. He had a few inches on Claire, but he always seemed to slouch. “They’re dead, Claire, they’re not sharks. They can’t bite through denim.”

She barked a short laugh. “Unfortunately, they really, really, can. It’s that *green shit* all over their teeth. It’s some kind of acid - it eats through anything: leather, denim, fuzzy socks-”

Mikey gave her a look. “Are you fucking with me right now?”

“And risk your life over a joke? Are you serious?” Claire demanded, crossing her arms. “Go ask the others if you don’t believe me.”

Mikey looked perturbed. He shook his head, then bent down to pick up an old milk jug and a strainer. There was no shortage of garbage left behind by previous campers. Before leaving, he said, “For the record, I’m going to get more water, not because you told me to.” With that, he promptly turned around and started heading toward the lake.

It was only a short walk down to the water. The decline toward the lake took a bit of a balancing act. He slipped a little but managed to keep his balance. Claire watched him go, a crinkle in her forehead. She didn’t bother going after him. Someone did have to stay behind

and watch over the campsite. And Castiel, too. Angel or not, he probably wouldn't want to get gnawed on in case there really were some… handicapped walkers… lurking around.

"Can you believe that guy?" Claire asked Castiel, not expecting an answer. "I bet he's cussing so much now 'cause he thinks you can't hear him."

Mikey was what she'd privately refer to as a "Baby Survivor". Some people took to the new state of the world matter of factly, accepting it readily and adapting to the craziness that had unfolded all around them. Others, like Mikey, took it a lot harder. They relied on other people for protection, keeping to the sidelines whenever they could. In her experience, Baby Survivors rarely lasted for very long.

It wasn't entirely his fault, she supposed. Enid had told her about Alexandria, and how sheltered it had once been. And Mikey *had* been pulling his own weight. He'd cooked, helped with the kids (who were also Baby Survivors, technically, on account of being *actual babies* ), and he'd even kept a meticulous tally of their inventory before those assholes Hunters came along.

Mikey was her friend. Her dorky, gawky, well-intentioned friend. One who was in desperate need of a haircut, but more importantly, needed to be able to take care of himself, himself.

Caring about other people was a bitch, she thought.

Most of her friends were down by the water. She couldn't see Scott anywhere, but Jake was sitting with a fishing rod on the old, rotting pier. Judith and Oliver were supposedly helping Carl and Enid dehusk and wash the black walnuts the two had foraged, and even from her vantage point, Claire saw how delightfully messy an endeavor that was.

Camping had never been Claire's idea of a good time, but at least the children were having the time of their lives, she thought. The little monsters had spent the better part of the day in their underwear, splashing around in the shallow edges of the lake or zooming around with endless energy, not a care in the world.

The sound of rustling leaves pricked up her ears. She tensed, her knife fell to her hand. A moment later Scott stepped up from behind the ransacked trailer they were camping by. He was carrying a rusty shovel and wearing an automatic rifle in a sling. His clothes were mud-stained.

“Um, hi,” said Scott, sheepish. “It’s just me.”

“I can see that, doofus.” Claire rolled her eyes and stashed the angel blade back into her sleeve. “What have you been up to?”

Scott left the rusty shovel against the trailer wall. “I stashed the guns. I figured we don’t need the ones we don’t have bullets for. We could always come back for them someday.”

“You buried them?” Claire asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, not far from here.” He perked up. “I made it look like a little kid’s grave, too, so nobody would think to dig it up, and if we do come back, we won’t have any trouble finding it. I even made a cross.” He lowered his voice superstitiously. “Don’t tell Carl, but I took that shirt Judith was wearing. The bloody one? I left it over the rocks. Adds credibility, y’know?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” said Claire. The last thing Carl needed was a reminder of the grave he almost had to dig for his baby sister. “Not for me to stifle your creativity, Scott, but you should’ve told someone where you’re going.”

“It’s not a big deal,” he said, shrugging. “I only came across one dead guy. I hid for a bit and he went away.” Flipping his rifle to his front, Scott plopped down next to Satan’s Pot, frowning when he realized the water was still too hot to gulp down like he wanted to. “Oh, man.”

“Here,” said Claire, handing him an old, used-up tin can.

Scott took it gratefully. “Thank you.”

“Here’s an idea,” said Claire as Scott quenched his thirst, “why don’t we hang these up before it gets dark?”

Scott wiped his mouth. “The old tin can trick.”

“Yep.”

It was a well-known party trick in their post-apocalyptic world. Claire wasn’t sure who’d first come up with it, or if it was just people’s common sense. Put up some cans on a wire and hope nothing actually shows up to make them rattle. It was something that must have saved many lives on dark nights.

Claire plopped down next to Scott. “Anyway, it’s a full moon tonight.”

Scott’s eyes widened. “Are you worried about werewolves?” he whispered.

Claire sighed deeply. “No, Scott. I’m thinking we’ll be able to see a little better with a full moon. *Why* would I be talking about werewolves?”

“Claire, dude, seriously.” Scott threw up his arms, water sloshing in his can-turned-mug. “Werewolves are the *least* surprising thing that could’ve happened to us.” He gestured at Castiel, lying motionlessly just a few feet away, and added, “There’s an angel in a coma right by that tree!”

Claire’s stomach churned. “He’s not in a coma. He’s *resting* .”

Scott pulled a face. “You know what I meant.” He chewed his lower lip nervously. “Has he moved at all since we got here?”

Claire squared her shoulders. “Not yet.”

Scott nodded. “Don’t worry, I’m sure he’s okay. Just needs a little shut-eye. He hasn’t slept *at all* since we hit the road.”

“He doesn’t sleep, Scott.”

As they sat there, it occurred to Claire that she had misjudged Scott terribly. In the beginning, she had pegged him as a Baby Survivor, just like Mikey. Jake had always been the more capable of the brothers, loud and boisterous while Scott sulked nervously in his shadow.

Except that wasn’t quite true, was it? Claire had seen the Hunters’ bodies. Even through all the chaos, between all the smoke and fire and deafening gunfire, Scott had taken headshot after headshot, all the while the dead swarmed from all around them. He hadn’t been a tiny bit nervous then. Not at all.

A few nights ago and after a few drinks, Scott had confessed to having a body count of zero, at least where the dead were concerned. Claire had believed it at the time. After all, she’d seen Scott take on walkers before. Someone had always needed to intervene because no matter how many times Scott would hit the things, they kept getting back up.

“Is it really true that you’ve never killed a walker before?” Claire blurted out.

Scott’s shoulders tensed. “It’s a long story,” he said after a long pause. “It’s not a nice one.”

He gave her a knowing look. “You know what, I’ll tell you all about it if you tell me how’d you put that knife up your sleeve.”

“What are you talking about?” With a brief motion, the angel blade fell to her hand. She showed it to Scott, who raised his eyebrows.

“That thing’s longer than your forearm.”

Claire frowned. It had been simple enough when Castiel had shown her how to do it. Just a sleight of hand. She hadn't put much thought into it then. Except that now she realized that Scott was right, the blade didn't logically fit inside her shirt sleeve the way it had fit before into her jacket. The t-shirt she wore, oversized as it was, really wasn't long enough to sheath the angel blade properly.

"Huh," she said, studying the shiny blade. "I didn't notice. I guess it's, like, magic."

"You didn't notice," said Scott, shaking his head. "No offense, Claire, but you're honestly the weirdest person I know." He jerked his thumb toward Castiel. "Him included."

Claire gasped in mock offense. "You take that back."

The pitter-patter of little feet scampering up the hill interrupted them. A moment later Claire had a lapful of a breathless, squirming little boy. She gasped when an elbow accidentally caught her in the jaw.

"Claire, help!" Oliver gasped out, curly hair plastered to his face. "He's trying to eat me!"

Jake came shambling up the hill. His handsome face was contorted in an ugly snarl as let out a long, gasping moan. Jake staggered menacingly toward them, right hand raised and grasping. It was what he was holding in his left hand that shook her.

"Is that a goldfish?" Claire asked, surprised. Still hooked to a line was probably the biggest goldfish she had ever seen.

Jake stopped his terribly accurate impersonation to glare. "Of course it's not a goldfish. It's a gold-colored fish."

"In other words: a goldfish," Scott said with a deriding snort.

Jake huffed. “Show some gratitude, man. I spent half a day trying to catch this thing.” He then threw the fish at his brother, who caught it instinctively.

“Ugh! It’s so… wet,” Scott complained, holding it out at an arm’s length.

Claire raised her blade. “Do you think I can clean it with this magic holy knife?” she asked, grinning widely at the idea of having more than just walnuts for dinner.

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As the day drew to a close, the group settled down to eat. The black walnuts turned out okay once they finally got the damn things open. Since they couldn’t find a nutcracker or even a hammer among the tools scattered around the campsite, they’d ended up putting the broken-down truck on neutral and rolling it down the hill, the walnuts sacked up and laid down in its path.

The goldfish tasted like mud. They scraped it clean, pushing most of the stringy meat onto Judith and Oliver.

Oliver tried the fish and immediately adopted a grossed-out expression. He stuck out his tongue, which had little bits of white meat on top of it. Claire rolled her eyes and poked his tongue with a fishbone. The six-year-old snapped his mouth shut.

“I don’t like it,” Oliver complained, small face scrunched up in disgust.

Claire’s stomach growled. “Tough luck, kid. Now eat up.” She handed Oliver another scrap of meat, carefully cleared of poky fish bones.

Oliver’s mouth turned down in anger. The sun had darkened his light-brown skin considerably, making his pale eyes shine bright in comparison. He took the morsel from Claire’s hand, munching on it quickly and discontentedly.

Jake leaned forward and ruffled Oliver's hair. "Cheer up, kiddo. At least it's not broccoli."

Oliver ducked out of the way, pouting. "I like broccoli."

As the sun went down, the campsite became a hubbub of activity. They chased after the younger kids, packed their meager belongings, and bickered over sleeping arrangements. They picked through the scattered garbage and found a decent number of tin cans to hang around their perimeter, creating a rudimentary alarm system in case anyone or *anything* came skulking by.

Castiel remained stubbornly asleep through it all, and from time to time Claire caught her friends exchanging worried glances.

Several hours into the night found them sitting around the extinguished fire pit, chatting about nothing in particular. In the dark, the woods became eerie, looming shadows. Insects chirped incessantly, seemingly louder with every passing moment. From time to time, a bat would announce its presence by flying low above their heads, as if checking in on them.

Claire was reminded of the last time she had gone camping. She'd been about eleven and it was her church's annual summer camp. They played all kinds of sports, and the popular girls always picked Claire for their teams, even though she wasn't particularly good. They played Tag and Capture the Flag, ate s'mores around the campfire, and Truth or Dared at least half the camp into their first kiss.

Claire hated it.

It was right after her father had walked out on them. Claire was sad and withdrawn because her daddy had just told her he wasn't her father anymore. Worse was that everybody at camp knew about it, because it was the church's summer camp, and Claire's grandmother had never been known to keep her mouth shut.

Somehow, she felt a lot at home with her ragtag group of friends, in their nightmarish post-apocalyptic world, next to a passed-out creature wearing her father's face, than she ever did at that camp.

“You know,” said Claire, aimlessly picking at the dirt from beneath her fingernail, “this is a lot like Bible Camp.”

Enid, who had grown up in an atheist household, tilted her head curiously. “How’s that?”

“It wasn’t just singing Kumbayah around the fire, you know. We’re camping, aren’t we?” Claire worried her lip for a bit before admitting, “I’ve been praying a lot, also.”

“I hear you talking about it the other day,” Carl interjected, looking at Castiel’s prone form. The angel was laid on his back a short distance from them, little Oliver tucked asleep at his side. “Can he really hear you when you pray?”

“Doesn’t mean he’ll answer, but generally, yeah. It’s like leaving a voicemail. Kind of.”

“Can he hear you now?” asked Carl.

Claire shrugged. “Can’t hurt, right?”

The teenagers looked at one another. Wordlessly, operating on the same idea, they all dropped their heads and closed their eyes. Several moments passed before the silence was broken when somebody started to giggle.

“Sorry, sorry,” said Jake, he tried once again before collapsing to the side in a barely contained fit of laughter.

Judith, who much to their chagrin was still wide awake, saw Jake lying on the ground and immediately pounced on him, letting up a happy squeal when Jake snapped her up and lifted her in the air, as she had clearly hoped he would.

Castiel was still unconscious.

“It’s okay,” said Claire, catching Carl’s disappointment. “It was a long shot anyway.”

“Hey, so,” said Jake as he sat up. He had Judith flung over his shoulders, much to her teetering delight. “How’re we carrying Cas out of here tomorrow? He’s heavy as fuck.”

“ *Fa-ack* ,” Judith parroted happily.

Enid hid her laugh behind a cough. Carl adopted a look of horror.

Jake grinned at Judith over his shoulder.  “No, babygirl. It’s pronounced ‘fuck’. Can you say it after me? Fuck?”

“Judith, no, we don’t say that,” Carl said quickly, stepping up to collect his little sister.

Judith didn’t like that at all. She kicked and squirmed, hitting Jake in the nose with her tiny foot. Then she let out a shrill scream, probably making every walker in their vicinity aware of their presence.

Jake rubbed his nose. “Nice, man.”

“You are such an ass,” said Carl as he resigned to Judith’s demands to be let down. The toddler immediately scampered back to Jake and climbed onto his lap. Then she decided sitting was too boring, so she stood up, balancing on Jake’s knees.

Jake rolled his eyes over Judith’s blonde head. “What? Like, she can grow up killing walkers but she can’t hear a bad word?”

“She’s not killing any walkers till she’s at least, like, *nine* .”

The cans jingle as someone stepped into their camp. They all relaxed when they saw it was just Mikey, coming back from nature’s call in the woods.

“What the hell was that?” Mikey asked, looking behind him to see if any walker had been beckoned by Judith’s tantrum.

“Jake’s an idiot,” said Scott, shaking his head.

Mikey flopped down to the ground. “So, the usual?”

Jake threw a walnut shell at Scott. “If I ever turn, I’m eating you first.”

Claire hummed a little, watching Judith using Jake as a jungle gym. “How is she not tired yet? It’s after midnight, I’m pretty sure.”

Oliver had long since conked out. He had cozied up next to Castiel right after dinner, on a pile of old clothes. Judith, on the other hand, had fought them off at every step. She hadn’t wanted to sleep next to Oliver, or go potty, or eat walnuts-and-fish for dinner. In the end they’d given up and figured she’d tire herself eventually.

“Do you think she’s different now?” asked Scott in a soft tone. “After… you know.”

Carl scoffed at that. “She’s just wired up ‘cause she had a long nap in the afternoon.”

“It’s not that,” said Scott, frowning deeply. “Look at her, she’s a ghost.”

Carl’s mouth fell open.

Jake looked at his brother, aghast. “Dude, *what* ?”

Scott raised his palms, defensive. “I meant she’s *pale* , man. Sorry, that came out wrong.” He chuckled a little, nervously. “We spent the whole day out in the sun. It’s not like we had any sunscreen or anything. You’re all red in the face, but Judith’s still white as a sheet.”

“He’s got a point,” said Jake after a long pause.

Carl’s jaw twitched. The darkness turned his features sharp, the space where his eye should have been pitch black. “You’re not sunburned.”

“I’m Indian,” he pointed out with a snort. “Your sister looks like a Gerber baby.”

“Maybe it’s like, an aftereffect of coming back from the dead,” Mikey suggested, oblivious to the rising tension. “It’s not really a bad thing, is it?”

“I guess not,” said Carl with a sign and a glance in Castiel’s direction. Then with a heavy frown, he sat back down. “There’s something we need to talk about.”

Claire felt rather than saw Enid turn rigid at her side. “What’s up?” Claire asked.

Enid let out a long sigh. “It’s something you should know before we get to Alexandria. It’s only right.” She brought her knees to her chest, crossing her arms over her knees. “Jake, Scott, that old group of yours. They called themselves the Saviors, didn’t they?”

The twins looked at each other. Jake sat up straight, setting Judith down on the ground. “You met them.”

Enid shook her head. “Not personally.”

“They attacked some of our friends,” Carl explained, looking down at his hands.

Jake sucked a breath through his teeth. It was Scott who asked softly, “Did you lose anyone close to you?”

Carl shook his head. “No, they handled it. They uh, had a rocket launcher.” Grimly, Carl went on to tell them about the next encounter his people had with the twins' old crew. He told them about a place called the Hilltop, and an agreement they'd made with them - supplies in exchange for mercenary work.

It was obvious most of the events had been given to Carl second-hand. Claire tried to keep pace with the story. She knew Carl’s dad was named Rick, that Michonne was his friend-turned-sort-of-step-mom, and that Glenn and Maggie were good friends to both him and Enid, but the rest of the names sort of blended together.

“Wait, wait, what’s this about Jesus, again?” Claire interrupted.

Carl paused, frowned. “Uh, just this guy. He’s the one who introduced us to the Hilltop.”

Claire pressed on. “Yes, yes, but is he *actually* Jesus?”

Carl’s mouth opened and closed a few times. “No?” He suddenly seemed unsure. “I think his real name’s Paul.”

“So, let me get this straight,” said Jake, rubbing his face. “You - and possibly Jesus Christ, what the fuck - you went and attacked the Saviors to help out that jackass Gregory?”

“I wasn’t actually there.” Carl frowned. “You know Gregory?”

“Is Gregory the one with the rocket launcher?” Claire asked.

“No, that’s Daryl. Gregory’s the leader of the Hilltop,” Enid said.

“He is such a dick.” Jake sniffed.

“Maggie did say he was a creep,” Enid offered, shrugging. “He paid, though. Things got back to normal after that, as far as we know.”

“As far as you know,” Jake repeated darkly. “Jesus Christ. We should’ve stayed back with the army. Negan’s gonna skin us alive if he finds us around Carl’s asshole dad. No offense.”

Carl smiled faintly. “A little taken.”

“He’s not wrong. Your dad *is* an asshole,” said Mikey, quickly adding, “and that’s not necessarily a bad thing, alright? If this Negan guy is so dangerous, I'd be glad to have your dad on our side.”

Claire lifted up a hand as if she was in a classroom. “Negan’s one of the Saviors, right?”

“Negan’s dead,” Carl stated matter-of-factly. “That’s the one thing I do know. Dad killed him himself.”

“Bullshit,” Jake shot back. “I’ve seen that asshole shake off a fucking bite. Ain’t no way your old man put him down.”

Claire threw up her hands, exasperated. “ *Who’s* Negan?”

“He survived a bite?” asked Enid, skeptically. “That’s impossible.” She suddenly had a thoughtful, almost excited look on her face. “What if he’s not human?"

“Like Cas?” Jake asked in disbelief. “Trust me, Negan’s no angel.”

“He could be a demon,” Claire suggested. “Have you ever seen his eyes do this weird, black thing-” she waved at her face. The twins blinked at her, clearly a no. She persisted, “Does he give off this weird smell? Like rotten eggs?”

Jake threw up his arms. "I’ve never sniffed him!”

Claire had another idea. “Maybe he’s a vampire? Does he, um, avoid the daylight?”

Claire didn’t, strictly speaking, know anything about vampires.

“Does he sparkle?” Enid muttered.

“He likes to swear a lot and hit people with his bat,” Scott offered tentatively. “The bat’s name is  Lucille.”

“Jeez. He sounds terrifying,” Claire said, sarcastic.

Jake scowled. “Hey, laugh all you want, but do you know what Negan does to traitors? He hangs them up like scarecrows in front of the Sanctuary. See, if you smell bad enough, the dead, they leave you alone. They walk right past you. If you really piss him off he’ll just cover you in guts and let you hang there to rut, alive, with all the dead ones to keep you company. Keeps you hanging there for as long as possible, too. You’re *lucky* if you’re dead first.”

“Jake, we promised we’ll protect you, and we will,” said Carl resolutely. “Nothing’s changed.”

Jake laughed bitterly. “Fuck you, Carl. And your eyeball.”

“This isn’t helping,” Scott scolded his brother gently. “We could have stayed back with the army, but we chose to keep going. Alexandria’s what, a day’s ride away from the Sanctuary? Negan was gonna find it sooner or later. We knew the risks.” Looking at Carl, he asked, “That place your people attacked. Where was it?”

Carl exchanged an uneasy look with Enid and Mikey. “We weren’t there.” After a long pause, he added, “I don’t know.”

Scott pressed on. “How many people were killed?”

Carl’s mouth thinned. “I wasn’t there, Scott.” He tilted his head. “What are you trying to say?”

“I think that you took down an outpost,” Scott replied, cool as though they were discussing the weather. “The one closest to Hilltop would’ve outfitted, what, twenty? Thirty?” He looked at Jake, who nodded. “The others will have wanted to find out who did it. They’ll know Hilltop had something to do with it, and trust me, Gregory *will* talk.”

Carl let out a soft exhale. “How many outposts are there?”

“There are four we know of, plus there’s the Sanctuary. The are hundreds of people there. Not all fighters, but enough," Scott said.

Jake added, "They’re not all bad, man. Most of them are just trying to survive.” He rubbed at his shoulder with a heavy sigh. “Not much to do about it now. Like it or not, there’s gonna be a fight. There’s *always* a fight.”

“You're all talking like we haven't got Cas on our side," said Mikey in an incredulous tone. "Things are different now."

Claire felt her anger flare. “Cas is *sick* , in case you haven’t noticed. He nearly died saving our asses today.” Her voice trembled when she said, “He’s not some rabid *dog* you could sic on your enemies, Mikey."

Mikey held up his hands in surrender. “I’m not saying he should murder everyone, Jesus. But, think about it, if people find out about him, maybe they won’t… they won’t want to fight. Nowadays everyone’s always at each other’s throats because they think this is it, right? End of the world and everything. But if they knew about Cas, knew who he is -”

“They’ll… what?” Jake cut him off. “Sit around a campfire singing Hallelujah instead of ripping each others’ throats?” He rolled his eyes. “Don’t be a moron.”

"Murdering everyone is a valid option," said Scott, straight-face. "What?" he asked at their furrowed expressions. "You can't expect us to ignore that Cas is a total ace in our pocket just because you've got this weird thing about him. I'm sorry, Claire. I know you want to do the right thing. I do, as well." He smiled sadly. "But I wanna live, too."

“Claire does have a point, you guys,” Enid said, her words bringing a swell to Claire’s throat. “We can’t ask Cas to risk himself when we don’t know what we’re up against. Especially with those hunters still around. Who knows? Maybe Negan was one of them. Maybe he wasn’t human. I’ve never met anyone who’s immune. Have you?”

“Nobody’s immune to a bullet in the head,” Carl argued. He immediately deflated. “Well, Cas is, I guess, but that’s not the same thing.”

Enid shook her head. “We don’t know what we’re walking into. Until we do, I think we need to stick to the original plan.”

Claire snapped her fingers and pointed at Enid vehemently. “Yes! Thank you!”

The original plan was something they'd discussed at length. Or, in point of fact, argued.

It was the answer to the question, "What the hell are we going to tell everyone?" The answer was, of course, that they'd been kidnapped. And that they had survived. And that Castiel was their friend. Their completely normal, very human, extraordinarily ordinary friend. The plan did *not* include a single word about Angels with a capital A, Heaven, or ancient Aztec gods. None whatsoever.

Of course, on the two separate occasions where they'd actually encountered real living people, their plan had immediately gone straight out the window. But, damn it, Claire was determined to finally see it though.

She *knew* the others were still in awe of Castiel. She knew that. They didn't get it. They didn't get that angels *were dicks* and that God was *the worst* and that none of what they'd been through really mattered, the world had died, and all of them, all of them, even Castiel, were all on their own.

Not to mention that something *was seriously wrong with Cas* . He couldn't be trusted not to accidentally blow himself up. He needed someone to watch over him, and Claire intended to do just that.

"We can figure this out on our own," Claire stated, hands clasped into fists above her knees. "Whatever's going on with these Savior people, we'll figure it out. We can leave Cas out of it. I've been saying it this *whole time* -"

Carl's alarmed voice interrupted. "Where's Judith?"

A sharp pang of terror shot down Claire's spine. Her head swiveled as she looked around for the missing girl. She spotted her almost immediately, and her heart stuttered. Judith was sleeping soundly in the crook of Castiel's arm. He was awake.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry.

# True Faces

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Castiel blinked at them slowly, not looking at any one of them in particular. It occurred to Claire that he might have been thrown off at finding himself transported to a campsite in the middle of the night.

The teenagers glanced at one another. Wordlessly, they left their seats by the extinguished fire and crowded around Castiel, careful not to disturb the sleeping children.

Claire settled down in front of him. “Hey,” she said, laying a gentle hand on his arm. Judith was nestled in the crook of it, fast asleep. “Are you okay?”

“That,” said Castiel after a long moment, “was a profoundly unpleasant experience.” His voice was somehow even grittier than usual.

Flushed with relief, Claire said the first thing that popped into her mind: “You sound like a phone sex operator.”

Her comment was followed by a cacophony of groans and snickers. Mikey audibly facepalmed.

“What?” said Claire, defensively. “He does.”

Castiel’s familiar blue eyes flitted toward her. “That’s inappropriate.”

“You’re inappropriate,” Claire shot back, nonsensically. Normally, she would’ve found it difficult to stay mad at him when he was looking at her with such tired eyes, but now she found herself struggling to even look at that painfully familiar face.

“You’re angry with me.”

“I’m worried,” Claire clarified, calmly. She forced herself to stare him down. “We all are. What the hell were you thinking? You just stood there and let those assholes shoot you down.”

Tiredly, Castiel pointed out, “Their weapons couldn’t harm me.”

Claire huffed. “You were bleeding.”

“The vessel was bleeding,” Castiel said simply. His expression softened. “Claire, this isn’t my true form. You know that.”

Claire sucked her lower lip into her mouth to stop it from quivering. “You still need to take care of it.”

He nodded. “I promise.”

Claire sighed and leaned into him. It wasn’t exactly a hug, she couldn’t bring herself to wrap her arms around him just yet, but it was close enough. After a moment, Castiel began to pat her back, awkwardly.

“Sorry,” Claire sniffed, speaking into Castiel’s shoulder. “You scared the shit out of me.”

The hand on her back stilled. “That’s a figure of speech.”

Claire sniffed. “Yeah, Cas.”

“It’s terrible.”

“You’re terrible,” Claire grumbled.

Judith squirmed in the crook of Castiel’s arm, all the commotion disturbing her sleep. “Let me take her,” said Claire, pulling back and lifting the sleeping toddler to her arms. None of them had even noticed Judith slinking away, all too caught up in their discussion.

“You saved her life,” Carl whispered, so low Claire barely heard it. His face was lowered, concealed by his long hair.

Castiel closed his eyes briefly. “She’s too young, it wasn’t right.”

A tremor went through Carl’s frame. “Thank you.”

Frowning, Castiel reached forward and took Carl’s chin, lifting his face gently. Castiel tilted his head, saying nothing for the longest time. To Claire’s relief, he didn’t wonder about the missing bandage or even lingered on Carl’s maimed eye. In fact, even though he was looking straight at him, Claire had the strangest feeling that Castiel wasn’t seeing Carl’s face at all.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t heal you as well,” Castiel finally said, speaking softly. “There are certain things I cannot do, not now when my powers are so volatile.” He dropped his hand, sighing. “I’ve put you all in grave danger. I’m sorry.”

“Are you kidding?” Carl choked out.

He jumped forward and embraced Castiel tightly, clinging to him with desperate gratefulness he couldn’t express in words. He held on to the stunned angel for several long moments. There was a heavy silence when Carl finally pulled back.

“Thank you,” Carl said in a shaky voice, dragging his wrist over his one good eye.

Mikey handed Carl a bottle of water, because that was the sort of thing you'd do when someone was emotional next to you. Carl accepted it with a shaky nod of his head.

"Do you want something to drink?" Mikey asked Castiel, shuffling his hands. "We've got walnuts. I know you said you don't really eat, but, um…"

Jake let out a snort. "You said you don't need sleep, either." He threw up his arms. "That was a long power nap, man."

Castiel frowned. "That wasn't sleep," he said insistently, missing or choosing to ignore Jake's sarcasm. "At times of catastrophic injury, it may appear-"

" *Catastrophic injury* ?" Claire demanded.

Castiel let out a long, aggravated sigh. He closed his eyes and lifted a hand to his forehead, rubbing at the crease there. "It's not serious as it sounds, I promise," he said wearily. "A few burnt eyes, mostly."

"Yeah, we noticed," Jake said, looking a little queasy. "You got those guys pretty good. Though, uh… maybe a little warning next time?"

"I meant my own, actually," Castiel said, almost as an afterthought. He gestured, inexplicably, to his back. "They'll grow back."

"Uh," said Scott, attempting to superstitiously peer at Castiel's back. "How many eyes do you have?"

Castiel seemed surprised by the question. "You know, I never counted."

“You never counted,” Scott repeated dumbly.

Jake nudged Carl with his elbow. “Hey, maybe you could borrow a spare.”

“Jake,” Scott hissed. “We talked about this. *Filter* .”

“This isn’t funny, you dicks,” Claire said, furiously. “Cas - you nearly lost it back there.” After the hunters, after Judith, Castiel had nearly lost control. She’d seen it, they’d all seen it. What would have happened if she hadn’t talked him down?

Enid spoke up for the first time. “You’re not really okay, are you?” Her tone was gentle and full of worry.

Castiel considered his response for a moment. “I suppose it would be very human of me to tell you I’m fine.”

“But you’re neither,” Enid concluded. “So please don’t lie to us.”

Castiel nodded slowly. “I’m… full.”

Enid raised her eyebrows. “You’re full?”

“In a manner of speaking.” Castiel gave a little shrug. “I suppose I could draw you the necessary mathematical equations.” He tilted his head and asked, “Are you familiar with the quantum harmonic oscillator, by any chance?”

Enid laughed a little at that. “No one here even finished high school.”

“Hmm.” Castiel deflated a little. “It is very old magic,” he said finally. “We angels, we cannot *create* energy. We can absorb cosmic power, turn it into a form we can use, but there are limits.” He made a helpless gesture. “Tlaloc took away those limits.”

“Shouldn’t it make you stronger, though?” Enid wondered.

Castiel made a sound of bitter amusement. “It did, but it also created a damage to my grace. Made it brittle. I can’t control it. The best I can do is keep it contained. My grace, the… container, you might say. It’s too… full.” He seemed to consider something for a moment and added, “It’s not a question of having too much power, rather, too much of the right kind of power.”

His gaze flitted between them. “It’s like… eating cheeseburgers every day, all day. It will give you energy to use, or to store. But you physically cannot consume that many cheeseburgers. Your stomachs will burst.” He nodded knowingly.

“... so, you’re a fat angel?” Enid finished with a small smile.

“It’s not a perfect analogy,” he admitted. His expression hardened. “I need you all to promise me something.” Castiel stared them down one by one. “If something like that were to happen again, you will leave me. You run. You get as far away from me as you can.”

“That’s not - “ Claire started to say, so harshly that Judith startled in her arms.

“Claire, enough,” Castiel admonished her. “Promise me.”

Face heating, Claire pursed her lips. She stared at Castiel, who met her eyes straight on. Finally, she relented.

“Fine,” she said, huffing a long-held breath. “I promise.”

Castiel leaned back. “Thank you.”

She looked over at Enid. The other girl gave her a look of understanding. When the two of them had found Castiel, back on the freight ship, he’d been bound and chained. He told them that Tlaloc had forced him to absorb too much power, enough to turn him into a bomb, essentially. He also told them that he would eventually recover. Was that a lie?

Claire swallowed. “Just don’t do anything stupid, okay?” She looked at her friends, and added, “We can actually take care of ourselves, you know.”

“I agree,” said Castiel, eyes crinkling. He looked around then, gaze lingering on the broken truck. “How long have I been unconscious?”

“It hasn’t been a day,” replied Scott, stroking the strap of his rifle absentmindedly. “We got as far away as we could before we ran out of gas.”

“It’s just a pit stop,” said Claire, feeling strangely defensive of their little campsite. It might not be much to look at, but they’ve worked hard to recoup after the hunters had left them with nothing.

Without a word, Castiel climbed to his feet. He swayed for a moment, alarmingly, but managed not to step on Oliver who had been curled up beside him.

“Dude,” said Jake, jumping to his feet. He held out a hand to steady Castiel.

Castiel brushed him off. “It’s all right,” he said, making his way toward the truck. He reached inside the passenger side window and pulled out a small pouch.

“Is that the air freshener?” Claire called out, squinting. It was hard to make out in the dark.

“It’s a hex bag,” Castiel told them. He sniffed it briefly before nodding. “Oh, it’s quite harmless,” he said, handing it over to Jake.

“What’s it do?” Jake asked, holding the pouch between two pinched fingers.

Castiel leaned back against the truck. “Hex bags are normally used by witches. They’re a means to cast spells. This one will repel supernatural creatures.”

“Like you?” Jake asked, scrunching his nose.

Castiel had the nerve to roll his eyes. “No, not quite like me. Spirits, perhaps even ghouls.”

“Let me see that,” said Enid, scrambling to her feet. She took the bag from Jake and then brought it to her nose. She gagged. “Blegh! It smells like feet.”

Claire smirked. “See? I told you they were hunters.”

“Hunters?” Castiel asked.

Claire had forgotten he’d been out of the loop for that revelation. She nodded. “We’re pretty sure. I mean, they were saying stuff, plus we found marks all over them. And I mean *all over*.”

“What kind of marks?” Castiel asked slowly.

Scott perked up. “I took notes,” he said, rising up to pull the notepad from his back pocket. He paused to look at it, shoulders slumping a little. “Oh, it’s kind of dark. I don’t have a flashlight or anything…”

“I don’t need a light,” Castiel said, stepping closer to pluck the notepad from Scott’s hands.

“There’s that knife, too,” Claire pointed out. “Scott, can you grab that as well?” She nodded to her backpack next to the fire pit, where she’d left it.

Scott went to retrieve it. It was a plain-looking knife, unremarkable except for the markings on its handle. “That guy was trying to stab you in the back with it.”

“Scott stopped him,” Claire pointed out.

“Thank you, Scott.” Castiel barely glanced at the knife, but he smiled warmly at Scott.

“Is it also hexed?” asked Carl, eyeing the knife in distrust.

Castiel examined it briefly. He shook his head. “It’s silver, and old.” He turned the blade around before offering it back to Scott, hilt first. “But it is safe. You should keep it.”

“Knives aren’t really my thing,” Scott said, smiling crookedly.

“Keep it anyway,” said Castiel, before turning his attention back to the notepad. “This is very interesting.”

“They’re all from the same guy,” Scott pointed out, leaning forward to squint at his own sketches, “they all had that pentagram one Claire said was for demons. We weren’t sure what the other ones were for…”

“Hunters get them, right?” Claire interjected.

“I’m not so certain,” said Castiel, eyebrows rising as he studied Scott’s scribbled copies of the hunters’ tattoos. “These are… excessive.”

“Why’d they get them?” Mikey wondered loudly. He had been the first to point out their attackers’ unusual tattoos.

Castiel tilted his head. “They’re protection sigils, of many different origins. There’s Sumerian, Anasazi, Celtic, Arabic…” He stopped at one page, peering at it with a darkening expression. “Enochian,” he said, and quickly clarified, “of angelic origin. This one is a cloaking sigil. It would explain why I couldn’t sense them. But this - ” he made a small huff - “This is Enochian, but it’s just a curse. Angelic, but hardly a sigil.”

“It was on the dude’s butt,” Mikey piped up helpfully, then elbowed a sheepish Scott in the ribs. “So much for being thorough, huh?”

Scott didn’t seem so amused. “It’s a curse? Like The Ring?”

Castiel blinked. “No, it’s not a ring. A curse. As in, profanity.” He said something in a strange language and chuckled. “It means, ‘you breed with the mouth of a goat.” He looked at their faces expectantly. Upon receiving nothing but raised eyebrows he sighed in exasperation and clarified: “Goat fucker.”

Carl made the unfortunate decision to drink from his bottle. He choked. Enid kindly thumped him on the back.

“Cas!” Claire coughed, laughing despite herself. “ *Language* .”

Castiel sighed and ducked his head, sheepishly. “I really do feel terrible.”

Eventually, Castiel insisted they all get some sleep.

They argued, of course. No one thought it was right for Castiel to take watch, not when he was still obviously recovering. Castiel stubbornly pointed out that among all of them, he was the only one who didn't need the rest.

The ground was a poor substitute for a bed, however. Claire decided against the back of the truck, opting for a thin sheet on the ground with a backpack for a pillow. She remained awake for hours, listening to the leaves rustling overhead, the clinking of the cans they'd hung up for protection.

Jake must've had trouble sleeping, as well. There was a distinct lack of snoring. Eventually, she heard him sigh and climb to his feet.

"Hey, Cas," Jake was saying quietly, "can we talk?"

"Of course," said Castiel.

Claire rolled over to her side, watching them curiously. Castiel must have known she was awake but didn't pay her any mind.

Jake crossed his arms over his chest. "How much of that did you catch back there?"

Claire could practically see the question marks floating around Castiel's head. "What do you mean?"

"About our past," Jake mumbled, so quietly Claire had to strain her ears to hear him. "We…I hurt a lot of people."

Castiel looked at the teenager calmly. "Why did you?"

There was a long pause as Jake studied his feet. “Does it matter?”

“I ask myself that question, as well.”

Jake rubbed his face tiredly. “I told myself I didn’t have a choice. That it was us or them.” He thought about it for a moment before adding, “But I think I did.”

The silence hung heavy in the air. Eventually, Jake sat down next to Castiel, not looking at the angel directly. “We knew Heaven was a scam from the start, you know. It had to be, else why would we be there?” Then he asked, very softly, “Do you want us to leave?”

“Jake,” said Castiel, taking the teenager’s shoulder, “did you think I would judge you?”

Jake pulled back his shoulder. “I’m not a good person. I hurt people.”

“So did I,” said Castiel gently. “And I’m extremely old, so I’ve had something of a head start on you.”

Jake huffed a laugh. He stood up, turned to Castiel, and bit out, “What, like those hunters assholes? That’s nothing.”

“They were hardly innocent.”

“Yeah, well, how about this: I once blew someone’s head off in front of his wife.”

“It isn’t a competition,” said Castiel, shaking his head.

Jake spat out, “I beat up an old man for standing up to me.”

“Jake.”

“I set the dead on someone, just to impress my boss.”

Castiel gave him one of his piercing gazes. “The body I’m inhabiting as a vessel once belonged to Jimmy Novak. He was Claire’s father.”

Claire’s breath caught in her throat.

Jake made a low whistle. “That’s fucked up.”

“Indeed.” Castiel continued, “I’ve led a civil war in Heaven, killing hundreds of my brethren. I absorbed the souls of purgatory, proclaimed myself god, and inadvertently freed primordial demons in this world. I betrayed my friends.”

“Yeah, alright,” Jake said, sounding very tired. He flopped back down to the ground, leaning his back against a tree. He sighed. “Can you just tell me how to live with myself?”

“I can’t do that,” said Castiel, giving Jake a long, searching look. “You cannot change your past, no more than I can. But you’re not dead, Jake. The only one who can choose how to live the rest of your life is you. You can carry on the same path, or you can do your best to make up for it. What you choose from here on matters. Do you understand?”

Claire swallowed. She rolled to her other side, blocking out the rest of the conversation. Sleep didn’t come to her for the longest time.

Chapter End Notes

Two chapters in one year. Sound the alarms! XD

# Whack-A-Mole

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sun was already signaling midday by the time they trudged away from the campsite, their meager belongings strapped to their backs.

It was going to be a long walk to Alexandria. Their fault, for taking such a long and convoluted route to start with. They had been trying to avoid the cities and major highways, and the hundreds, if not *thousands,* of dead in their path.

Carl hoped to find a minivan, but he would have settled for a clown car at the rate they were going. Every scrap of metal they passed on the side of the road had already been siphoned or broken down for parts.

“I’m getting Deja-Vu,” Carl muttered to himself, recalling his family's last miserable expedition to Alexandria. At least this time they had a better clue of what they were getting into.

The group was moving at a slow but steady pace along a narrow road. The guys were taking the lead, with Castiel, Carl, and the girls following close behind. Carl had been carrying Judith on his shoulders, and it wasn’t long before he was starting to lag behind everyone. Judith wasn’t a large girl by any stretch of the imagination, but the added weight soon sent a twinge of pain to his lower back with every step.

Castiel, noticing Carl’s distress, reached over and plucked Judith from Carl’s shoulders. Judith adored Cas, she had no problem settling at his hip instead.

It was an immediate relief, but Carl couldn’t help sound a protest. “Are you sure?” he asked, wiping sweaty hair off his forehead. “She’s not too heavy, is she?”

Castiel gave him a look that was downright offended. “I’ve regularly swatted asteroids off the path of this planet. This is fine.”

Judith blew him a raspberry.

“That wasn’t very nice,” Carl told her.

"I still don't see the difference," Enid said, picking back on the conversation she'd been having with Castiel before the interruption.

“A prayer is a sign of faith, first and foremost,” Castiel told Enid while playfully dipping Judith down to make her giggle. He continued, “whether that carries a religious connotation is completely beside the point.”

Enid nodded her head. “Right, except that still basically boils down to me thinking thoughts at you."

"The difference is intent."

"That’s still *telepathy.*”

Claire, walking beside her, huffed in disagreement. “They're two different things.”

“I mean, you could read my mind if you wanted to, right?” Enid asked, pointing at Castiel.

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“Yeah, but you *could* . And let’s say I didn't *pray* , I just thought *really hard* at you?” Enid tilted her head toward Castiel and squeezed her eyes shut, and said, “Can you tell what number I'm thinking of?”

The corner of Castiel’s mouth twitched. “Seventy-two. And that still constitutes a prayer. It is a very singular frequency.”

Enid threw up her hands in protest. “That’s textbook telepathy!”

“You always have to be right about everything,” Claire grumbled, somewhat fondly.

“It’s more like a one way radio,” Carl suggested, tentatively butting into a conversation that clearly had been going on for a while. “I mean, it works long distance, no?”

"Mmm, speaking of long distances," Claire interjected, eyeing Castiel curiously, "how's *your* long-distance relationship going, Cas? Have you heard from Dean at all?"

“Yes."  Castiel didn't seem particularly happy about it.

“And? What’s he saying?” Claire prodded.

Castiel sighed. He shook his head in frustration. "Dean is praying, but he isn't speaking to me at all."

"How does that work?"

“A prayer doesn’t have to be verbal. It can be a feeling, a sense of longing," Castiel explained, "or anger. Dean is praying, but he's not saying anything at all." He pursed his lips in annoyance. "I think we're fighting."

Enid made a sympathetic noise. “Oh. He’s giving you the silent treatment.”

“I mean, can you blame him?” Claire asked, shrugging a little. “You’ve been gone for, what, a year? The guy must be worried sick.”

“He’s been trapped for most of it,” Enid said in Castiel’s defense.

“Yeah, but Dean doesn’t know that,” Claire pointed out.

Carl, somewhat bemused at the topic of conversation, tentatively suggested, “Can’t you, like, broadcast back to him? Let him know you’re okay?”

Castiel shook his head sadly. “Unfortunately no. Human senses are far too limited.”

“Rude,” said Claire, scrunching her nose.

Enid hummed in thought. “Let me ask you something. What was the last thing you said to him? Before you took off?”

“And got yourself captured,” Claire added, raising an eyebrow.

“It was quite mundane. Dean had left his jacket outside, so I told him I would bring it in.” He tilted his head and frowned. “That was when you prayed to me, Claire.”

Enid's mouth opened and closed a few times. Finally, she shook her head and sighed. "Oh, Cas."

"You didn't even tell him?" Claire asked, covering her mouth with her hand.

"There was no time," Castiel protested. "You were in danger!"

"You could have left a note! It would've taken you two more seconds!" Claire countered. She shook her head. "Poor Dean."

Castiel, concern creeping into his eyes, asked, "What should I do?"

It was Enid who replied, "You know Dean's okay, that's the important thing. You should think about what you'll say when you see him again."

"Don't downplay it," Claire suggested, tapping her finger to her chin, "but don't grovel, either. Yes, you flew off without telling him, but it's not your fault you got captured."

“I wasn’t planning to grovel. I was just thinking I should probably say hello,” said Castiel, taken aback. He thinned his mouth, frowning in concentration. “I could… bring him a gift? He likes pie. And… toilet paper.”

Enid tsked. "I wouldn't lead with that. And where are you gonna find pie, anyway?"

"What do you suggest?" Castiel asked, watching her keenly.

Feeling a little awkward and out of place discussing Castiel’s love life, Carl quietly hastened his steps. The guys were up ahead, threading a short way down the road. Jake and Scott were casually swinging Oliver between them, although they and Mikey seemed to be in a heated discussion of their own.

“-makes sense if you think about it,” Mikey was saying, gesturing animatedly.

“What does?” Carl asked as he caught up.

Scott huffed out a laugh. “Mikey wants us to wear Crocs.”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t say Crocs,” Mikey protested, raising his voice in annoyance. “I said *plastic* . We could wear rain boots.”

Not for the first time, Carl wondered if Mikey was a little bit insane.

There was a walker up ahead, standing listlessly in the middle of the road. It was missing one of its shoes. Drawn by the noise, the walker slowly pivoted in their direction. It let out a low groan. All alone, the thing was a mild threat at best, but the teenagers nevertheless crowded around little Oliver.

Mikey carried on. “Think about it. You’re saying their teeth are covered in acid, yeah?” He pointed at the creature moving slowly toward them. “Acid doesn’t eat through plastic. Haven't any of you seen Breaking Bad?”

Carl shrugged. He took out his knife, allowing the walker to catch up to him. “My mom didn’t let me watch it.” With a grunt of effort, he pushed the creature by the chest, making it stumble back. Before it could recover, Carl shoved his knife through its eye, killing it instantly. “She said it was too violent.”

The twins took Oliver each by the hand and swung him over the dead body as if it was just another obstacle in their path. Carl vaguely remembered doing the same thing with his parents back when he was little. There weren’t any corpses lying around the street back then.

“I just watched it on playback when my parents weren’t home,” said Mikey, stepping over the corpse as well. He sighed wistfully. “God, I miss television.”

“We have DVDs back home,” Carl pointed out.

Mikey scoffed. “It’s not the same thing. How many freaking times can you watch Footloose?”

“You guys waste genny power on TV?” Jake asked, scrunching his face.

Carl, boasting just a little bit, replied, “We don’t use generators. Alexandria’s hooked on solar, it’s awesome.” He grinned. “When we get there, I’m gonna show-”

“Stop,” came a stern warning from behind. The teenagers instantly halted.

Castiel and the girls caught up to them. Carl saw that Judith had been deposited in Claire’s arms. Castiel, who had sounded the warning, was staring into the distance, a look of concentration on his face.

“What is it?” Carl asked, squinting in the same direction. He couldn’t see anything except the road curving up to a hill up ahead, disappearing beyond the horizon. They were coming up to a bridge.

“More hunters?” Scott asked, unstrapping his rifle.

"Cas can't sense them," Carl reminded him.

“No,” said Castiel, still staring into the distance. His eyes narrowed. “A herd. Large.”

Carl swore under his breath. There wasn’t anywhere to go but into the woods. If the herd got turned, that was going to be the worst place to fend off against them. When they had the van, they would sometimes hide, quietly, and wait for the dead to pass, but here they had no such luxury.

“We could go under that bridge,” Claire suggested, shifting a little with Judith in her arms. “Wait them out.”

Jake shook his head. “If they hear us we’re dead. They’ll drop right on top of us.” He looked at Castiel, then. “Are you sure you can’t do that thing-” he held both hands in front of his eyes and mimed an explosion, complete with sound effects.

Castiel grimaced. “I’d rather not risk that.” He cocked his head. “But I may have another idea.”

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They spent the next twenty minutes clearing the bridge.

“This is ridiculous,” said Claire, twirling her knife in her hand.

Carl gave her a side look. “You’d rather turn back?”

Claire sighed. “I’d rather actually help out. Cas is not gonna leave any for us.”

“We’ll jump in if we have to,” Carl replied, shrugging. He had his knife in hand, plus a pistol tucked into his waistband, courtesy of the hunters.

They waited for the herd to come into view. It didn’t take long. At least a hundred strong, the walkers’ tireless moaning grew louder with every passing moment. It wasn’t the largest herd Carl had ever seen, but without access to his powers, even Castiel would have struggled against such numbers.

The idea was to push the encroaching herd off the bridge. Castiel had ripped off the metal guardrails lining the road to make that easier. There was a deep trench underneath the bridge, which probably flooded whenever it rained, but at present, it was just a deep, dry passage. The walkers weren’t going to be able to climb back out.

“What do you say, Captain Hook, are you ready for this?” Jake asked cheerfully, coming up behind them with his crowbar slung over one shoulder.

“For the last time, Jake, Hook was missing a *hand* .”

They were standing second in line for the upcoming battle. It was just Carl, Claire, and Jake, the more experienced fighters among the teenagers. While Castiel faced off the herd, they were supposed to take care of any stragglers. Enid was waiting much farther back. Her job was to run back and warn the others in case things got messy and they needed to make a hasty retreat.

“Why isn’t Scott here, again?” Claire wondered.

“He’s got like six bullets. He ain’t gonna waste them on the dead.” Jake grimaced. “Plus, he’s got his thing.”

“One minute,” Castiel called out, no-nonsense. He stalked to the middle of the bridge, carrying a sizable utility pole over one shoulder, cables still attached to the top. He dropped it next to the others he had uprooted, before looking back at them, stern-faced. “Get in position.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Claire intoned with a mock salute.

The first walkers made their way to the bridge. They moved faster than usual, pushed forward by the crowd. Walkers always seemed more riled up in groups, as if anxious to get their pound of flesh.

Castiel stood his ground, patiently waiting until the first wave was in reach. Then he struck out with one of the poles - hard. Four or more walkers went soaring over the bridge’s edge, gnarled hands grasping uselessly at the air. They hit the bottom of the trench with a dull thump. The next wave was met with the same fate. And the next. And the next. A few particularly stubborn walkers didn’t make it over the edge on the first try. They managed to shuffle to their feet, only for their rasping cries to be cut short by the next pole swing.

“You know what this reminds me of?” Claire said mildly, watching the spectacle with an almost bored expression. “Whack-A-Mole.”

“Really?” said Jake, tilting his head. “I’d say it’s more like bowling.”

The pole in Castiel’s hands snapped. Carl tensed. Claire took a step forward, weapon in hand. Neither of them got the chance to get their hands dirty.

Castiel dodged a pair of grabbing hands. He took a step back and in a single fluid movement picked up another long, thick pole and struck up in a curve at the nearing walkers. They, too, went flying over the edge of the bridge.

“Well, that was anticlimactic,” Claire said later, tucking her unused weapon back into her sleeve.

"You wanted a fight?" Carl asked dryly.

Claire threw him a grin. "It's good for the soul." She went to peer over at the writhing mess of bodies under the bridge. “Ugh, can you imagine falling into that?”

With a grin that never signaled anything good, Jake came up behind Claire. He gave her a mock shake-shove, grabbing her arms to make sure she didn’t *actually* fall over. Claire *screeched* , twisted around, and slammed her foot down *hard* on top of his.

“Bitch!” Jake yowled, stumbling backward and falling on his ass.

Claire gave him the finger. She marched past Jake’s sprawled form without giving his a second glance. Carl wisely stepped out of her way.

“You deserved that,” said Castiel, eyebrow raised. He held out his hand.

“You always take her side, man,” Jake complained feebly, still rubbing his sore foot.

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The group ventured into a small town next, intending to spend the night there. They were passing by a gated schoolyard when Claire suddenly stopped dead in her tracks. Carl, who had a problem with depth perception since losing an eye, nearly ran into her.

“What is it?” Carl asked, following her line of sight.

Schools had closed down early, back in those first days of the pandemic. There were no crowds of tiny dead children, at least none that Carl could see. A few walkers ambled along the schoolyard,  rendered harmless by the sturdy fence. They were starting to get noticed, however.

“I know her,” said Claire, pointing at one of the walkers. It had a woman’s features, long and thin with clamps of dark ratty hair. “I mean, I think so. She looks like my neighbor.”

“Mrs. Cooper,” Castiel nodded, coming to stand next to Claire. “Your father didn’t trust her.” His expression darkened. “She was a vegan.”

The walker snapped its teeth at them. Claire scrunched her face. “Not anymore. Poor Mrs. Cooper.”

Castiel grabbed the walker's reaching arm through the fence. With a jerk forward, he brought its face closer to the barricade, then neatly jabbed it through the skull. It died immediately, moan cut short, but remained upright, its arm stuck in the fence. Castiel pushed it back gently, allowing the body to fall.

“She’s a long way from home,” said Claire, shaking her head sadly. “I wonder how she ended up here.”

“They go where their instincts take them.” Castiel watched her with interest. “It’s just her body, Claire. She’s long gone.”

“Yeah, I know.” She stopped a moment to root through her backpack. She took out a long-sleeved shirt. Reaching through the fence, she threw the shirt at the body, just about managing to cover Mrs. Cooper’s face. “Least I can do,” she said.

“Of course,” said Castiel. “Come on, we shouldn’t linger.”

They found a house for the night. It was still early, but Castiel didn’t want to keep going after it got dark. It must have been a quiet neighborhood before the pandemic. The house had boarded-up windows and an overgrown lawn. It was easy enough to secure, once they got inside. Someone had gone through it before. The kitchen cupboard was empty, as well as the basement pantry. The adjacent houses were in a similarly sad state, but they’d lucked out and found a stash of candy in some teenager’s closet.

Jake, sighing contentedly, plopped down on the sofa with a candy bar. Claire immediately got up and changed seats.

“I said I was sorry,” Jake called after her.

Carl winced. “Maybe don’t push it. She’s pretty dangerous with that knife.”

The candy, at least, was awesome. It turned out that Oliver had never had candy before. The kid ate a chocolate bar and looked like he had discovered God. Sure, they had candy in fake Heaven, but food back there never tasted quite right, not unless you had some memory of it. Carl remembered trying green curry and having it taste like marshmallows to him.

They gave Judith sour candy to try. She pulled the most hilarious faces. And, after they insisted he partake as well, so did Castiel.

“This isn’t food,” Castiel said, horrified. His scrunched-up face was a mirror image of Judith's, making them laugh out loud.

“Sure it is,” said Scott through a mouthful of skittles.

They settled in for the night a short time afterward. It was a big house, and for once there was room to spare. Judith once again refused to sleep. One moment she was sitting next to Carl, the next, climbing up the stairs like a chipmunk on speed, practically vibrating with energy.

Jake ended up bringing her downstairs. She hung upside down in his grip, screaming with laughter. “Yo, Prince Zuko,” said the exhausted teenager before dropping Judith in Carl's lap, “I think this belongs to you.”

Squirming in his lap, Judith poked Carl right in his eye socket. “Ow.”

She giggled. Carl sighed. Giving Judith all that sugar was probably a mistake. He had a feeling it was going to be another long night.

Chapter End Notes

Things are about to get complicated, stay tuned.
Please leave a review if you can. They make me very happy!

# Kingdom Come

The old Subaru refused to start, and no amount of scowling at its innards was going to change that. Michonne tilted back Carl's hat as she turned her glare to the Heavens.

She had promised Rick she would be there this time.

Once a week, the Saviors came to Alexandria. They came like locusts, taking more than the community had to spare. Rick was running himself ragged, trying to keep the peace as well as keeping up with the ever-increasing demand. Negan rarely stopped by anymore. Bored, perhaps, of Rick's quiet compliance.

There had been an incident last week, Michonne had heard. Joe, their elderly neighbor, approached Negan's second in command. He sought permission for a new mattress. Joe was old, he had a bad back. And once the Saviors were through with him, he had a black eye and a broken arm as well.

Michonne hadn't been there to see it. She'd only heard about it after, from Rick. It killed her a little on the inside, coming back to a traumatized town and Rick's thousand-yard stare. To sleep on the floor in a house that was too big for just the two of them. It killed her to see Rick's despair every time she came home empty-handed.

The Saviors claimed they didn't take the children. Rick believed them. Michonne had needed a little more convincing. She had captured one, a redheaded woman whose name Michonne never bothered to learn. The woman took Michonne right to their doorstep, a massive compound they called Sanctuary. When Michonne asked about the children, the woman laughed and called her insane.

Michonne had left the Sanctuary in her rearview mirror after that. A fight for another day.

Sighing in frustration, Michonne slammed the car hood shut. It was getting late, and she was no mechanic. If she wanted to keep her promise to Rick, she needed to start walking. Otherwise, she would never make it back to Alexandria by morning.

Leaving the car by the side of the road, Michonne set out to Alexandria. Back to Rick and their wounded community. She'd hold his hand and stand aside while the Saviors ravaged their home, and then she would watch them leave. She'd leave then, too. Those days, Michonne spent most of her time away from Alexandria. Searching. Everyone else had given up, but not her.

She decided to take a shortcut through an open field. Sweat rolled down her back before long. She used her sword as a sickle to make a path through the tall grass. From time to time, walkers would pass her by. She would throw a rock and wait until she could no longer hear their graceless gait and scratchy vocalizations.

Stopping to shake the last few drops from her water bottle, Michonne's gaze fell on a patch of exposed soil. She froze.

Michonne always held a soft spot for horses. Growing up in the city hadn't stopped Michonne from her riding lessons, every Saturday afternoon, from the age of eight to sixteen, until her beautiful chestnut Thoroughbred caught a bad case of Colic and had to be put down.

The fact of the matter was, Michonne recognized horseshit when she saw it.

It was easy enough to find tracks, now that she knew what to look for. It seemed to her that someone else was making a habit of cutting through the field. The tracks led her to a dusty old road, which led her to a town, and finally, to an unfamiliar settlement.

Taking shelter in one of the nearby houses, Michonne steadied her breaths, a form of meditation she'd once practiced before a major exam, and waited for the night to come.

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In the cover of darkness, Michonne made her way into the settlement. The young guards standing at the gates wore body armor and carried spears, but they failed to notice her sneaking past their walls.

Keeping to the shadows, she surveyed the settlement. Michonne didn’t know what she was looking for, exactly. It was much larger than Alexandria. There were not many people out and about at that hour, but more than a few windows were lit. Even in the moonlight, the settlement seemed green and vibrant. Gardens flourished everywhere she looked, some even growing flowers. The maddening scent of freshly baked bread wafted through an open window.

Her gaze fell on a standing blackboard. It’d been left beneath a great oak tree, with colorful mats and pillows strewn before it. There were children here, Michonne realized, heart in her throat. It didn't have to mean anything. It didn't mean they were hers.

She decided to make her way into the large building near the oak tree. A couple came strolling by, hand in hand. Michonne froze, sure they’d spotted her, but it seemed like they only had eyes for each other.

This place had a school before, she thought, peering into what once might have been an arts classroom. It was still being used, she realized, noticing the half-complete paintings that surrounded the teacher's podium. Some of them weren't even half bad.

Hearing footsteps coming from down the hallway, Michonne swore under her breath and ducked into what she thought was an empty room, only to find it wasn’t empty after all.

An ancient Asian woman greeted her with a stare. The woman stood frozen in the middle of a store room, her face was as wrinkled as an old prune.

“Don’t,” Michonne said quietly, reaching back for her sword in a warning.

That only seemed to anger the old woman. Michonne didn’t understand a word of Chinese, but she understood well enough when the old woman picked a can with her gnarled hand and threw it at Michonne’s head.

Michonne dodged it easily. “Shut up,” she hissed.

Undeterred, and with shocking strength, the woman lobbed another can at Michonne, missing her narrowly. Michonne seriously contemplated knocking her out, hesitating only because the old crone looked as though a stiff breeze would break her in half. It was too late anyway. Already there were footsteps coming from outside.

Gritting her teeth, Michonne made a run for the window instead. She rolled to the ground, losing Carl's hat in all the commotion. There was no time to pick it up. As soon as she got to her feet, Michonne felt the woosh of displaced air. She jumped out of the way, drawing her sword in one fluid movement as she turned to face her attacker.

The man laughed as their swords clashed. The silver of his hair caught the moonlight, framing his face like a halo. He was dressed in a colorful Hawaiian shirt, heavy necklaces around his neck, and rings on his fingers. His long silver hair was adorned with feathers. He beamed at Michonne over his silver sword.

"Magnificent," the man declared joyfully, "long have I yearned for a worthy opponent."

He spoke with all the theatrics of an actor at a Renaissance Fair. His shiny silver sword was attached to a cane. Michonne glared back and all but growled, "You have got to be fucking kidding me."

In response, the swordsman pushed back against her sword. Michonne stumbled, but kept her guard up, keeping her attention focused on the man before her.

A crowd was beginning to form around them. Men and women spilled from the surrounding buildings, many of them in their nightwear and carrying old-fashioned oil lanterns. More kevlar-wearing guards appeared as well, brandishing knives, guns, and spears. Michonne braced herself for a fight she couldn't win.

The swordsman raised his hand, stopping the guards in their tracks. "It is but a friendly duel," he announced.

A man broke through the crowd then. He was on the large side, with shoulder-length hair and a beard. His pajama pants had a pattern of avocados. He paused to look at Michonne.

Smiling, he said, “Yo.”

Michonne glared back, unimpressed.

The man then turned to the swordsman. He held up a kevlar chest piece. “My king.”

“You are a faithful armor-bearer, Jerry.” The swordsman, *the king* , smiled benevolently. “But that won’t be necessary.”

With that, the king charged. The spectators watched, enthralled, as their swords clashed together time and time again, sounds of clanking metal and grunts of efforts filling the air. The king launched a relentless offensive attack, with less flourish than Michonne anticipated, and with far more skill than she would have given him credit for.

It’d been years since Michonne had faced another swordsman, and the king’s fighting style had nothing to do with the fencing lessons Michonne had taken back in college. She was caught on the defensive, the king leaving no room for her to launch an attack of her own.

Finally, Michonne was knocked down to the ground. She lost her grip on her sword. Swearing inwardly, Michonne braced herself for a killing blow. It never came.

The king stopped and stooped down, offering his hand. Michonne responded by throwing dirt in his eyes. He recoiled, giving her the opening she’d needed to slam her forehead into his nose.

The king stumbled back with a shout, hand flying to his face. Michonne picked up her sword and rolled to her feet. The guards rushed to stand between them, ready to defend their so-called *king* .

“Halt!” The king cried, holding his hand out in warning. His nose didn’t seem broken, but it was bleeding freely down to his chin. Taking a sickening long snort, he spat a glob of blood on the ground. He chuckled and sheathed his sword.

The man in the avocado pajamas, Jerry, came and handed the king a handkerchief, which the king gladly accepted. He dabbed at his nose, winced, and said, “Well played, my lady. We shall do this again someday.”

“Like hell,” Michonne spat out. “What is this?”

The old woman from the storeroom pushed her way past the crowd. She stood hunched over a walking cane, yelling at the king. He listened to her attentively, waiting patiently for her to say her piece. When she was satisfied, the king chuckled.

“Mrs. Zhao tells me she has caught you trespassing in the storeroom.” The king said, turning to Michonne. “If food is all you seek, we will gladly share it. But know this, if you’ve come to do us harm, you will not leave this place alive.” His smile never wavered. “My name is King Ezekiel. Welcome to the Kingdom.”

Michonne looked around. As odd as it all seemed, no one in the crowd seemed hurt or afraid. Finally, she sighed and sheathed her sword. “I’m looking for my children.”

She hadn’t meant to say they were hers. It had slipped out.

“Your children,” Ezekiel repeated, cocking his head. Realization dawned on his face. "Ah, I see. You are a friend of Lady Carol, then?"

"Lady Carol?" Michonne scoffed. She didn't have anything to say to Carol. The woman had taken off without a word a few days after the children had disappeared. “She’s here?”

"As am I," said a familiar voice. Michonne turned to see Morgan, dressed in the same body armor as the rest of the guards. He was flanked by a boy with blond hair who seemed to be around Carl’s age. Morgan looked at her with sympathy. "They're not here. I'm sorry."

The blond boy held Carl's hat. He had a guarded look on his face, but he held out the hat for Michonne to take.

Michonne didn't trust her voice to speak. She gave a quick nod. Another dead end, then. Giving a quick shake of her head, Michonne turned to walk away. This had been a complete waste of time, she thought, and Rick was waiting for her.

"It is late," said Ezekiel suddenly, stepping in front of her. He offered her a soft smile. "If you wish to stay the night, we will gladly-" The king suddenly fell silent, an expression of bewildered surprise crossing his face. He turned to stare into the distance, his head turned just so.

The crowd murmured, alerted by Ezekiel's strange behavior. Michonne followed his gaze and strained her ears, but found nothing out of place. Suspicious, her fingers itched for the hilt of her sword, wondering if the king was playing some kind of game.

It started as static electricity. The hair in the back of her hands rose. Then came a flickering light from above them, a spotlight coming back to life. The hanging speakers likewise crackled and hissed.

"What are you doing?" Michonne demanded. She lifted a hand to her ear, wincing at the screeching coming from the speakers. The noise was going to bring out every walker within five miles.

King Ezekiel ignored her, still staring into the distance. Jerry answered for him, looking as bewildered as Michonne felt. "That's not us!"

It wasn't just the spotlight overhead that was lighting up. The air was crackling with electricity, and every light in the Kingdom seemed to flicker on and off, bright as if the power grid hadn't shut down a long time ago.

A ringing was building in Michonne's ears. Like someone dragging furniture on a hardwood floor, or nails on a chalkboard. The others felt it too. It built and built, intensifying, becoming a shriek, becoming unbreakable.

Michonne fell to her knees, her hands clasped over her ears. She cried out when glass rained down on her from the building's shattered windows. It was hard to tell if the ground was really shaking, but it felt like it was about to open wide and swallow them all.

Fighting to open her eyes, hands shuttering her ears, Michonne saw most of the people had also collapsed to the ground. Morgan was shielding the blond-haired boy, covering his body with his own. The oil lanterns had exploded into shattered glass, but the flames had been snuffed out by the bodies rolling around in the dirt. They were screaming, crying out, but Michonne couldn't hear them over the deafening shrieking in her ears.

King Ezekiel stood motionless among his people. He kept staring into the distance.

# Supernova

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Claire was startled awake by a hand on her shoulder. She reached under her pillow for her knife; luckily, her sleep-addled mind caught up to her hand and she didn't end up stabbing Carl in the face.

"What d'you want?" Claire mumbled, voice thick with sleep.

Carl's expression was grim. "We've got company." He jerked his head at the window.

Muttering curses under her breath, Claire sluggishly rolled to her knees. She inched toward the window above her bed, peering through the lacy pink curtains into the street below. There was a car driving slowly down their street, its high beams turned on. As Claire watched, two men climbed out of the still-moving vehicle and began to prowl alongside it. Whoever they were, they were obviously looking for something.

Claire let out a low groan. "Fuck." It was so unfair, she thought. She'd been looking forward to spending the night in an actual bed, for once. "Maybe they just live around here?" Claire glanced behind her only to find Carl had already left the room. She sighed.

Dragging herself up, Claire shoved her feet into her boots, not bothering to lace them. She stepped on a broken barbie doll on her way out of the bedroom. The hallway was pitch black. It was a lovely house, but it had been abandoned for years, overtaken by dust and spiderwebs. Whoever the strangers were, their arrival couldn't have been a coincidence.

Claire had meant to follow Carl down the stairs, but changed her mind when she passed the master bedroom. She spotted Enid standing by the bedroom's window, peering through a slit in the curtains. The younger kids were present as well. Oliver was still lying in bed, rubbing his eyes and looking around sleepily. Judith sat beside him, chewing on a Twizzler and watching them curiously, a frown on her little brow.

Claire raised a finger to her lips, gesturing for the kids to stay quiet. She to the other side of the window, facing Enid. Standing flush against the wall, Claire pushed the curtains back the slightest bit, taking care not to be seen. The glass was filthy, dust and streaks of bird droppings obscuring their view. It was a tilted window that opened inwards. It didn't want to open, hinges stuck from lack of use. With some effort, Claire managed to pry it open. Slowly, so as to not draw any attention. A cool night's breeze drifted into the bedroom, raising goosebumps on her skin.

"Who are they?" Claire asked. She guessed they could be Saviors. From what the twins had said, they were not too far from the Saviors' compound. Or, she supposed, they could be Hunters. Enid had mentioned spotting more of them the other day.

Enid gave a helpless shrug in response. "No idea," she answered, keeping her voice low. "They just showed up."

Claire tilted her head to see farther down the street. She frowned. "There's another car coming."

The second car's headlights must have been broken because they flicked dimly as the vehicle rolled forward. As it drew closer, Claire noticed that it was actually a jeep. It stopped in the middle of the street for what seemed like forever before finally continuing its slow approach. Finally, it pulled into their driveway. Claire tensed up, her angel blade slipping into her hand. She didn't have a gun, but the other teenagers each had one for protection, and of course, there was always Castiel.

Speaking of which. "Where's Cas?" Claire whispered.

"I don't know," Enid mouthed back, concern lining her brow. "What do we do?"

Claire didn't know. She desperately wanted to go downstairs. On the other hand, she didn't want to leave Enid all alone with the kids. Glancing back at Judith and Oliver, Claire once again raised her finger to her lips, although the two had yet to make a peep.

She turned back to the window. The jeep looked like it was held together with spit and duct tape. The heavily armed men that pulled out of it seemed just as scruffy. Claire squinted, trying to see if the men had any occult-like tattoos, but they wore jackets, so it was impossible to tell.

One man was not like the others. He was on the shorter side, and he walked slowly, dragging his left leg with obvious effort. He held some kind of device in his hands. It looked like a ham radio, Claire thought. Well, technically she'd never seen a ham radio before, but whatever the stranger was carrying, that was the way she'd always pictured it. It didn't make any sounds, as far as she could pick up, but it had some kind of antenna, and the man seemed to be fidgeting with its various knobs and switches.

Another man sidled up beside him. "Sure ya readin' it right?" he drawled lazily, close enough that his voice carried through the open window.

The shorter man didn't look up from his instrument. "You would think so, wouldn't you?" the man replied, a touch of condescending amusement in his voice. His crisp English accent came as a sharp contrast to his companion's southern drawl. "I built it, Mr. Janklow."

Janklow chuckled. It was an unpleasant sound. "Then you won't mind explainin'."

"You wouldn't understand," the Englishman said, shaking his head. Glancing up at his companion, he sighed and offered reluctantly, "It's a modified spectrum analyzer. Do you know what that is? No, of course, you don't. Hunters, you're not the most educated lot, are you?"

Another man stepped forward, dark-skinned with a mean scowl. He didn't say a word, but he didn't have to. The Englishman took a step back.

"Reggie here's got himself a Ph.D. in Eastern Philosophy," Janklow stated proudly, thumping his friend on the shoulder. He turned his head slightly. "Now how about that? Pretty smart for a hunter, ain't it?"

Reggie crossed his arms over his chest. He didn't say a word.

“Really?” asked the Englishman, caught off guard. “Well, that’s something, I suppose. Well done, erm… doctor.” He cleared his throat. “If you must know, this - “ he raised the device slightly- “allows me to detect signal distortions in background frequencies.”

Janklow snapped his fingers. “Like echos.”

"Precisely. They’re subtle; but unmistakably celestial.” He tinkered with his device some more until, finally, he let out a frustrated groan. “It was here recently. We’ve just missed it.”

“Can’t ya track it again?”

“What does it look like I’m doing? It’s a delicate instrument, not a bloody compass.”

The floor creaked inside the bedroom. The men downstairs instantly swerved their heads to the window. Claire ducked, pulling Enid down with her.

Mikey stood at the bedroom door, yawning and scratching his stomach. “What’s goin-mmmph!”

“Shhh!” whispered Oliver. He’d sprung up to stand on the bed and slapped his little hand on top of Mikey’s mouth.

Mikey stared back at the kid in wide-eyed confusion, then looked at Claire and Enid, bemused. He seemed to put two-and-two together quickly enough, realizing that something was happening outside.

Nobody had gotten Mikey, Claire realized guiltily. “I’m so sorry,” she mouthed at him, then gestured at him to keep quiet.

No one moved or spoke. They didn't dare peek at the window again. A few moments passed in tense silence. Finally, they heard the Englishman speak up in disdain. "It's only the dead."

Claire let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding. Beside her, she felt Enid do the same. The Hunters didn't seem too interested in getting into the house, and for that she was grateful. Their last run-in with their kind had been bad enough. She rose to her feet and carefully readjusted the curtains, braving another peek at the strangers. The Englishman was obviously agitated, muttering under his breath while he fiddled with his device. The other two watched him impassively.

"We done here?" Janklow drawled lazily, studying the dirt under his fingernails. "It ain't here. We might wanna try again in the morning."

That only served to upset the Englishman. "And risk it flying away? Are you mad?"

Janklow let out a low chuckle. "It took Roy's truck, didn't it? The thing ain't flying nowhere."

The other man seemed to consider that. He nodded slowly. "You raise a fair point," he admitted. "Perhaps this one is… disfigured."

Claire's skin crawled. The Hunters were obviously looking for Castiel. She didn't like the way they kept calling him an *it*, or *the thing*, and she especially didn't like that they didn't seem to be the rank amateurs Castiel had suggested they were.

With a frustrated sigh, the Englishman began to limp back to the jeep. "All right, let's circle back to the others. I'll need to move somewhere with a higher altitude to recalibrate properly." He glanced back at the house with a heavy frown and added, "It's close, *I can feel it*."

They left. The jeep rumbled loudly then faded away as the strangers drove off into the night. The other car followed behind them. Claire didn't feel too relieved, all things considered. "What the fuck was that?" she asked, turning to her friends. "And where the fuck is Cas?"

“Castiel isn't here?” Mikey asked anxiously. He jumped, startled, when Carl suddenly appeared at the doorway, followed by Jake.

Jake leaned against the doorframe. "They're not Saviors."

"Honestly, I would've preferred it if they were," Enid said, exhaling sharply. "Did you hear what they were saying? They're hunting Cas."

Carl went to the window. He looked outside, then nodded to himself. He holstered his gun. “Cas went out about an hour ago,” he said.

"Went where?" Claire demanded, feeling a headache coming on. She was too young to be babysitting a billion-year-old angel.

Carl sighed. He sat down next to Judith, pulling her to him in a one-armed hug. "He wanted to look for, uh, real food," Carl said, grimacing when Judith handed him her half-eaten Twizzler.

Claire rubbed her temple. "We shouldn’t have given him any candy."

Claire turned to Jake, forgetting for a moment that she was angry with him. "Where’s your brother? Did he leave with Cas?”

“Nah, he went up to the attic, said he’s got a better view from up there.” Jake imitated a gun going off, clicking his tongue for added effect.

Enid made a thoughtful hum. "You know, I think I know where Cas might've gone." She bent down to tie her shoelaces, adding, "it's not far."

Claire nodded. "That's a plan, then. Let's go get him. The rest of you, be ready to leave as soon as we get back."

Carl stood up. Claire shoved him back down. “You can stay here, you obviously haven't slept a wink.”

“But-” Carl protested.

Claire raised a hand to stop him. “*I'll* go with Enid. We're the fastest."

"Says who?" Jake muttered as she shoved past him.

"Says me," she called over her shoulder, already out the door.

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Claire and Enid hadn’t left the others a chance to argue. Smaller groups were anyway less likely to draw attention, from the dead or the living. They took off in a light run, hoping to get to Castiel before the Hunters did.

They had a pretty good idea where he went: a supermarket they'd passed on their way into town. It was a Safeway chain store, not too far from the house. They hadn’t bothered going in the first time, seeing as the place had been crawling with walkers. Regardless, it was a well-known fact that most supermarkets and department stores had been cleaned out a long time ago.

Claire would have told Castiel that, had he asked. “He’s so impulsive,” Claire complained to Enid, a little out of breath.

Enid's hair bounced with her every step. “Reminds you of anyone?”

Claire rolled her eyes. “Watch out,” she said, spotting a walker in their path. It lay on its belly, legs cut off at its knees.

"Do you think they know he's an angel?" Enid wondered, sidestepping the walker's grasping hand.

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe they think he's something else. Hunters are supposed to hunt monsters, right?" she paused, breathing fast, "angels aren't monsters."

Claire grimaced. She wasn't sure about that. The Castiel she'd met all those years ago, the one who had a stick up his ass and didn't care about anything but his mission, that Castiel could've been a monster for all she cared. He'd mellowed out since, sure, but somehow she doubted the rest of the angels shared his perspective.

"Hunters are not supposed to shoot babies, either," Claire pointed out huffily.

The shopping center was coming into sight. They slowed their pace, catching their breath as they scanned the area. The parking lot was a minefield of dead bodies. Some of the bodies were displaying obvious stab wounds. Claire hoped it was a sign Castiel was nearby, but it was impossible to say how fresh the bodies really were.

Rounding up a corner, they came face to face with a particularly lively walker, dressed in a tattered paramedic uniform. It rushed at them with teeth gnashing and fingertips like claws. Working together, Claire and Enid forced it to the ground and shoved a knife through its eye.

“I think it crawled out of that ambulance, over there,” Enid pointed out in between short, rapid breaths. The walker had been stronger than its skeletal frame suggested.

Claire went to look at the ambulance more closely. Something had caused it to crash against the side of the building. It was a common enough scene, she supposed. Emergency services had been one of the firsts to go. She noticed that there was a gurney hanging halfway out the ambulance's backdoors, its occupant's feet struggling feebly against restraints. Feeling sorry for the person it had been once, Claire climbed into the back of the ambulance and pierced the creature's skull, letting it out of its misery.

"Let's go," Claire sighed, shaking her knife clean.

The supermarket was just up ahead. They approached it warily, careful not to step on any of the bodies in their path. The building's windows were surprisingly not broken. Hooding her hands against the glass, Claire peered into the store, trying to make out anything in the dark. She gasped and jumped back when a decrepit face suddenly appeared right in front of her. The walkers trapped inside the supermarket emerged like ghosts from the darkness, pressing their horrifying faces to the glass, fingers clawing fruitlessly against its surface.

"Losing your life in the toilet paper aisle," Claire muttered darkly, "what a shitty way to go."

"Do you remember all the looting back then?" Enid asked, shaking her head. Then she sighed. "I guess I was wrong. I don't think he's in there." She watched the walkers crowding behind the store windows. "What do we do now?"

Claire bit her lip, thinking. Just then, a shadow appeared behind their reflections on the glass. Claire spun around, blade ready, when she realized it was Castiel.

"Jesus Christ, you scared me," Claire hissed, lowering her blade.

Enid breathed a sigh of relief at seeing Castiel, giving away how worried she'd actually been. "Cas, thank God."

"What are you doing here?" Castiel demanded, as angry as she'd ever seen him. "It's not safe."

Claire punched his shoulder. Annoyingly, he didn't even sway. "Looking for you, asshole," she said, rubbing her aching fist.

Enid was a little more composed. "Hunters showed up at the house. We came to warn you; they've been tracking you, Cas."

Castiel's eyes widened. "Who-?"

Claire shook her head. "Not your boyfriend, I'm sorry. It was some British creep and his lackeys."

"And they're *definitely* looking for you," Enid added, clearly agitated about the fact. She fidgeted, shifting her weight from foot to foot. "They were using some kind of, I dunno, homing device, I think? They were tracking you with it. We've heard them talking about it."

"Did they see you?" Castiel asked, brows furrowed. "Is everyone alright?"

Enid bobbed her head. "Yeah, yeah. They're waiting back at the house."

It occurred to Claire that the Hunters probably only knew about Castiel. She'd assumed they'd come after them because of what they did to their friends, but how could they? They must've just seen the bodies with the burnt-out eyes and just figured: angel.

She was about to point that out when they heard the jeep's rumbling in the distance. All three tensed, looking around for the approaching vehicle. It came barrelling into the parking lot, followed by several more vehicles that quickly had them surrounded. Claire lifted her arm to her face, blinded by the sudden onslaught of headlights. They were trapped there in front of the supermarket; walkers at their backs, hunters at their fronts.

Claire felt Castiel's hand on her shoulder, grounding her. It was time to consider their options. Even if Castiel was impervious to gunfire, Claire and Enid certainly weren't. Even so, could

they even fight? Claire only had her angel blade with her. Enid had a gun and exactly two bullets. They were going to have to talk their way out of this one.

Talking… wasn't exactly Claire's strong suit. "What the fuck do you want?" Claire shouted. Her grip on her blade tightened.

The Hunters came out of their vehicles. They had an unpleasant air to them. The few women among them seemed especially unpredictable. Claire recognized the two she'd seen before, Janklow and his silent friend Reggie, among the crowd. They stood there, brandishing firearms and hawk-like expressions. It was a show meant for intimidation. But as her eyes adjusted to the light, Claire noticed many of them were holding their knives and guns in death grips, the white of their eyes betraying their nerves.

The Englishman with the big mouth appeared. He used his car's frame for support as he hobbled forward in obvious excitement. "Well, hello!"

"Again, what the fuck do you want?" Claire asked, gesturing at the man with her angel blade.

The Englishman eyed her angel blade curiously. "You're not what I was expecting." He raised his hands placatingly, stepping closer. As he moved, his jacket shifted, revealing a small handgun tucked into his waistband. "My name is Victor. I'd like to talk."

"Your business is with me." Castiel stepped forward, pulling Claire and Enid slightly behind him. "Talk quickly."

"Oh." Victor wetted his lips. He drew closer, his gaze passing over the three of them with keen interest. "Of course, my mistake."

Claire huffed a breath. "*You're* a hunter?" she asked, skeptically. The Englishman, or Victor, as it turned out, was a short, skinny man, with an entirely forgettable face. He didn't strike her as much of a hunter.

Victor pulled a face. "Oh heavens, no. I'm a *researcher*. I was sent here some years ago to study-" he made a vague gesture at Castiel- "that. For the betterment of mankind, you see. After that disaster of an apocalypse, oh, when was it? 2010?" He turned to Janklow, who nodded slowly. "That's ancient history now, I suppose."

"Sent by who? The queen of England?" Claire asked, unable to help her mocking tone. She was becoming increasingly annoyed by the encounter, and by the way Victor's friend, Janklow, kept staring at her. "Tell us what you want."

Victor chuckled softly. "What I want is to live a long, comfortable life." He lifted his pant leg, revealing a crude prosthetic. "And my leg back, of course."

Castiel's reply was terse. "I can't help you."

Victor tsked, dropping his pant leg. "See, I knew you would say that. *Angels*." He scoffed, shaking his head. "While I admit I'm very curious about this arrangement," he said, waving his hand at the three of them, "I'd rather just get on with it."

Victor drew the handgun from his waistband and fired at Castiel.

Claire cried out instinctively. She stood so close to Castiel that she felt the impact of the bullet hitting him. For a moment, nothing happened. Then Castiel swayed, surprise written on his face, and fell to his knees. Claire and Enid went down with him, doing their best to keep him upright. He clutched at his shoulder, blood seeping from between his fingers.

"Cas!" Enid cried out.

"What have you done?" Castiel gritted out through clenched teeth, still gripping his shoulder.

Victor grinned smugly. His jaw was crooked, giving him a lopsided, almost cartoonish grin. "Do you like it?" He lifted the gun slightly. "Angel-killing bullets, my creation. I am what

you would call an *expert* in my field.” He rolled his eyes when Castiel groaned in pain. “Oh don’t fuss, it wasn't a kill shot.”

Enid was breathing heavily. Still crouched at Castiel’s side, she drew out her pistol. “Stay back!” she warned, her hands shaking.

It didn’t seem to give Victor any pause. His eyes glazed somewhat as he stared at Enid, seemingly lost in thought. He pulled out a necklace from under his collar. It was some sort of talisman, an intricate design on a long chain. Victor rubbed it between his fingers, muttering, “We’ll need a blood sacrifice for the binding spell.”

That gave Janklow the cue to swagger forward. He smirked at Enid. "How 'bout you hand that over before ya hurt yourself?"

Victor tried to hold him back. “I didn’t mean-”

It didn’t matter; Enid took action. She pulled the trigger. Her hands were shaking so badly that she missed Janklow entirely. Pissed off, the hunter rushed at her. She fired again, and her second shot hit Janklow dead center in the chest. He stared at Enid in shock, and she stared right back at him, mouth open in horror. Claire knew she’d never killed anyone before.

Reggie, the hunter who’d so far stayed silent, made a terrible anguished sound. He caught Janklow as they both fell two the ground. He cradled Janklow in his arms, their hands joined at the gaping wound in his chest.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Claire got to her feet and called out, “Hey, goat fucker!”

Her fist collided with Victor’s jaw in the most satisfying way. He stumbled, the angel-killing gun scattering to the ground. Claire scrambled after it. Victor did the same, but she was faster. She managed to grab it in time to pistol-whip him across the face, knocking him off his feet. He was stronger than he looked, but so was she.

“Angel-killing bullets, huh?” Claire panted out, chest heaving. “I bet they work on assholes like you, too.”

Groaning, Victor rolled onto his back. Licking the blood from his lips, he stared up at Claire with wide eyes. “Now, wait a minute-”

“Shut up,” Claire snapped.

It was a short-term victory, she knew. The other hunters were already drawing on her. Would they care if she killed Victor? Somehow, Claire doubted it. The only reason they hadn’t fired on her already was the walkers at her back, behind the glass windows that could shatter with a stray bullet. Nevertheless, she knew it wasn’t going to be a fight she could win.

The lights in the parking lot began to flicker.

“Claire!” Enid called out to her, alarmed.

“Listen to me,” Victor said, holding a palm out defensively, “that thing, it’s not what you think it is. It’s *evil*-”

Claire fired another shot at his feet. His scream was high-pitched and distraught. She wondered if he cared more about losing his precious bullets than his life.

“Tell your friends to stay back,” Claire warned, flickering her gaze to the hunters. It was then that she noticed they were backing back, alarm written on their faces.

A tremor was building beneath her feet. Breathing hard, emotion rising in her throat, Claire yelled without looking behind her, “Castiel, *you need to snap out of it*-”

A hand landed on her shoulder, hard. Castiel staggered forward, using her as a crutch. He was gritting his teeth with effort, and his eyes - they shone, pupils glowing with dazzling white

light. He was still clutching at the bullet wound. With a pained cry, he let go of his shoulder and a flash of light pierced the air. Claire felt herself being flung away by the sheer power of it.

She came to a few seconds later, groaning. Claire lifted her head off the ground, scraping her chin on the asphalt. Miraculously, she was still gripping the angel-killing gun. Enid appeared beside her and pulled her up to her feet. There was a roaring in her ears. Claire wondered if she had a concussion. The ground shook beneath their feet, and Claire and Enid held each other to keep upright.

One of the hunters' cars had been converted into a smoldering, fiery mess, the ground around it scorched so hotly the asphalt had turned red. Distantly, Claire could hear screeching tires as the rest of the hunters fled in their vehicles. Victor was nowhere to be seen, but Claire couldn't care less about him right then.

"Cas!" Claire yelled over the noise gushing in her ears. She spotted him leaning over the hood of the hunters' jeep, head hanging low. The hunters had left it behind.

They ran to him, but before they could reach him, something grabbed Claire's foot. She fell, slipping out of Enid's grip. She instinctively brought up her arms to cushion her fall and her forearms slammed on the ground, painfully. She looked down to see Janklow had turned. The walker was snapping its teeth, snarling. It was hanging onto her ankle with an iron grip. Newly turned walkers were strong.

"Let go!" Claire yelled, kicking at its face. It didn't release her until Enid appeared and shoved her knife into its eye.

They reached Castiel. He was holding his shoulder, bowing low over the hunters' jeep. Light was shimmering beneath his hand. Claire was surprised he'd managed to hold it together for so long. It was a good sign, wasn't it? It had to be.

There was a buzzing in the air, almost like static electricity. Claire swallowed. "Come on, Cas. You did it before. Just keep it together for me, okay? Can you do that?"

“No,” he grunted out, shaking his head minutely. “I can’t.”

“Yes, you can!” Claire insisted, having to shout above the rising shriek of the wind. “You have to!”

With great effort, Castiel lifted his head to look at her. Light shone from his mouth and eyes. His voice sounded all wrong. “Claire. You promised me.”

Claire couldn’t see his eyes behind the white glare. It shimmered under his skin in waves. It was like staring into the sun. She had to look away.

“We have to go!” Enid screamed, pulling Claire’s arm. Her voice sounded far away, although she was right next to her. “Claire! We have to go!”

Castiel stumbled back from the jeep, face downturned. The hand not clutching his shoulder was held up, holding them at bay. *Go*, he said, but it wasn’t his voice she’d heard, but a cracking bolt of lightning that flashed across the sky. *Go*, *don’t look back,* it said again, and the ground shook. Castiel fell to his knees.

Choking back tears, Claire allowed Enid to pull her into the jeep. Enid drove them out of the parking lot like a woman possessed, determination written on every inch of her face. Claire didn’t heed Castiel’s warning and looked back. There was a column of light where Castiel stood, so bright it made her eyes water. For a moment, she wondered if she’d turn to salt. She averted her gaze, only to cry out a warning when a tree fell in their path.

Enid managed to swerve around it in time, cursing. For someone with barely any experience behind the wheel, Enid turned out to be an excellent driver under pressure. Claire didn’t know how the jeep stayed in one piece. It thrummed under them, every light flickering, radio spewing deafening static. The chaos seemed to be following them, streetlights burst one after another as they passed, ramming into walkers without care. Then a chasm opened in the road before them. Claire screamed out a warning, but it was too late.

Claire had only a vague recollection of what followed. She couldn’t remember crawling out from under the upturned car, or their desperate dash to the house, her hair blowing wildly

around her head and the wind nearly lifting her off her feet. She could only vaguely remember Jake half-carrying her into the house and down into the basement, where they all huddled together, hands clasped over their ears as the house fell apart on top of them.

Somewhere far away, someone was screaming. Somehow, Claire knew that it was Castiel.

Chapter End Notes

1) Goodness, I can't believe that's done. I've been contemplating this chapter for literally years! I hope I did it justice. We're approaching the final third of the story, and I am so pumped about it! Stay tuned for more. And if you can, please drop a review - they mean the world to me ❤️

2) About Victor - this story is a canon divergent from SPN season 8, but I started this story back in 2017, around when SPN season 12 was airing. I remember hating the British MOL plotline but also thinking, okay, how do they know so many angel-related tricks? They must have sent some jackass over around the time of the first apocalypse and well, I guess he got stuck in America. Sucks for him.

3) About Janklow and Reggie - those are two hunters Sam encountered somewhere around season 5, I think. They were also dicks.

# Scorched Earth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They survived the night. The ceiling had caved in on top of them and yet somehow, miraculously, they survived. Scraped, bruised, and bleeding - but still alive.

The basement's air was hot and stuffy beyond measure. They'd taken refuge in the narrow space beneath the stairs, cramming together like sardines. As far as any of them could tell in the near pitch black darkness, a shelving unit had toppled over, shielding them from the debris but also blocking them in. It was hard to breathe, one person's exhale becoming another person's inhaled breath. As the dust settled, the group realized that they were trapped there, beneath the rubble. No one was coming to their rescue. They would have to claw their way out of the wreckage or die huddled in the dark, where at least they had each other.

Claire didn't dare move, even though someone's elbow was digging into her rib cage. Every time they shifted, something above them creaked or shuddered, threatening to bury them alive. She'd hurt her knee, somehow. It was throbbing like crazy. Had she been injured when the house collapsed? Or had it happened earlier, when they were fleeing from Castiel? Claire couldn't remember.

"There's gotta be a window or something," Claire whispered, her heart hammering away in her chest. It was getting harder and harder to breathe.

The air was stuffy with the scent of blood and sweat, but with the slightest hint of a cool night's air seeping in. Carefully, they followed that lifeline, crawling under the slanted shelving unit, bumping heads and elbows, and swallowing their panicked breaths. As dawn broke and slivers of light trickled in, their hopes were lifted by the sight before them: a hopper window hanging high on the far wall, their beacon of salvation.

The window was blocked from the other side, but tiny embers of light shone through the rubble. Claire was the first to reach the gap by the wall. She stood there, holding her palms flat to the surface. She lifted her face to suck in trickles of fresh air.

They began to chip away at the blocked window. They did it until their fingernails bled and their arms were sore, taking turns sitting on each others' shoulders in order to reach the window high above them.

"It's not good enough," Enid rasped, climbing down from Mikey's shoulders, her face chalk-white even in the dull light. She dropped to her knees, exhausted, coughing up concrete dust.

Claire gripped Enid's shoulder, taking comfort in her friend's presence. She looked up at the window, biting her lip to stifle a scream of frustration. All that time and all they could manage was to open the smallest gap. None of the teenagers could fit through it.

Claire breathed out slowly. "We have to keep going."

Enid hid her face in her hands. Then she looked up, and her gaze fixed on Oliver. Claire understood immediately. The teenagers couldn't fit through the gap, but the children could. Of course, they couldn't send Judith, but Oliver was just small enough to fit through it. It was a lot to ask from a six-year-old. Oliver was just as tired and frightened as the rest of them, but he nodded his head solemnly, a waft of dust rising from his curly head.

"Wait," said Carl, stopping them.

He passed a reluctant Judith to Mikey, having to peel the whimpering toddler away with softly whispered reassurances. The space they had painstakingly claimed was so small that they were practically on top of one another, but Carl managed to inch closer to Oliver, dropping down to his eye level.

"No more kids stuff," Carl said, voice hard as steel. It was an intensity he rarely displayed, leaving no room for arguing. He pulled out his pistol.

Claire closed her eyes. Suddenly she felt lightheaded. In what crazy, fucked-up world did it make sense to hand a six-year-old a loaded gun? She bit her tongue, knowing Carl was right.

With practiced movements, Carl showed Oliver how to engage and disengage the safety, and how to aim, and fire. “Hold it with both hands, like this.”

After the short lesson, it was time to go. Carl lifted Oliver to the window, a full foot above his head. The boy was a good climber, latching on to the opening with surprising strength and tenacity. He pulled and wriggled, making little grunts of effort, gaining nicks and scratches from the sharp edges.

“Suck your belly in!” Jake called out, then immediately succumbed to a coughing fit.

Oliver complied, taking a deep, audible breath. He squirmed and twisted until finally, his feet disappeared through the small opening. “I did it!” he exclaimed proudly.

"Atta boy, Ollie," Jake croaked, wiping his mouth with his wrist.

Immediately, Oliver began to clear away the blockage. He babbled as he worked, narrating his efforts until his squeaky voice was wheezy with exertion. The rest of them could do nothing besides call out words of encouragement, offering guidance where they could. It took time; Oliver was just a little kid, small for his age. But bit by bit, the passage grew.

Claire pressed her forehead against the wall, shifting to take the weight off her aching knee. It hurt more when she was standing still, she discovered.

“Are you okay?” Carl murmured beside her.

Claire tried to smile, but it came out more of a grimace. “I think I’ll live.”

Something metal clattered to the ground outside, and Oliver gasped. “Oh no!”

Claire stiffened in alarm. “Oliver?” she called to the boy, palms pressed to the wall and face lifted toward the window. She could see a bit of the blue sky outside, but nothing else

besides. “What happened?”

The cause of Oliver’s distress soon reached their ears. A walker stumbling closer and closer, its gasping snarls unmistakable. There was nothing they could do, the gap was still too small for them to crawl through. Suddenly, there was a gunshot. A body fell to the ground.

Claire held her breath, blood rushing in her ears.

“*I’m okay!*”

The group erupted into chaotic cheers, the terror that had ripped them so tightly for a moment displaced by a shocking sense of relief. Claire turned her back to the wall, sagging against it. Her bones felt like noodles. She caught Carl’s eye, giving him a slight nod. He looked away, Adam's apple bobbing.

Soon enough, they were crawling out of that basement, one by one. Claire collapsed to the ground, every nerve in her body on fire. She rolled onto her back, not caring what she was lying on. She stared up into the blue, blue sky, breathing in the clean air. Oliver’s head popped into her field of vision. Like her, he was covered in dust and grime, but he was grinning.

Claire started to laugh uncontrollably. She was so very thirsty and so very tired, but the knowledge that they’d escaped, that they were not buried alive, made every bone in her body tingle with euphoria. She pulled the startled boy into her arms, squeezing until he squealed in protest.

“Nice going, kid,” Claire said as soon as she could speak again, her ribs aching from the sudden laughing fit.

She stood up slowly, releasing Oliver from her grasp. Taking in the sight around her, Claire felt the last ebbs of laughter dying in her throat. There was rubble all around, stretching as far as she could see, as though they were standing in the aftermath of a major natural disaster. In the light of day, it was shocking how bad her friends looked. They were a mess, bruised and battered, covered head to toe with gray dust. Brown streaks ran down their ears. Claire’s

hands rose to her own head, returning with flecks of dry blood. She stared down at her fingers numbly.

Jake was the last one to exit the basement. He had to be pulled out after helping the rest of them scale up the wall. He crawled out on his knees and forearms, coughing hard, his brother thumping his back. Finally, Jake shuddered and hacked, spitting out a large amount of phlegm.

“That’s nasty,” Scott said lightly, patting his brother’s back lightly. His dark, wavy hair was colored chalk-gray with dust.

Sagging with relief, Jake spat out one last time. “Feel like I smoked a volcano,” he said hoarsely. “And not the fun kind.” With a long groan, he climbed to his feet, shaking off Scott’s help. He turned to study the hole they’d just crawled out of, and what had been left of the house. “Jesus. I hope they had insurance.”

Scott looked at Claire. He asked quietly, “Cas did this?”

Claire nodded slowly, wrapping her arms around herself. They’d spoken about it briefly, but seeing the reality of it was staggering. The town was gone, reduced to miles of ruin. All because of those Hunters and what they’d done to Castiel.

Enid released a long, shuddering breath. She stared at the remains of the house in horror. “How did we survive this?”

Claire remembered the van crash. Castiel had protected them then, hadn’t he? She looked at her friends, bruised and battered but still standing. “We have to go find him.”

Carl was holding a sniffling Judith to his chest. He looked at her, face full of dust. “Do you think he’s still alive?” he asked quietly.

Claire swallowed. “We have to check.”

It was slow going, making their way to what used to be a shopping area. The farther they went, the worse the devastation became. Walkers began to appear, popping out of the ground or drawn in by the chaos. Some of them were blind, their eyes hollow and burned out. A few of them seemed to be stuck in a stupor, ignoring their presence altogether. There were more bodies on the ground, burnt-out husks with blackened mouths. They passed hills of rubble and ruins, and long crevasses cutting deep into the earth. It was like a scene out of a disaster movie.

Claire sighed long and hard. It was hard to determine directions when the entire town was a crater. She stepped around a large car door displaying the word *emergency* in bright red letters. “It was somewhere around here,” she muttered.

“There, look!” Scott called out, pointing.

A body lay on the ground. It was too far away to make out any features, but there was no mistaking the dark blue coat. It was Castiel. And something else had noticed him too.

“Oh, God,” Claire whispered, frozen in horror.

They were slow, the walkers. But they’d noticed Castiel as well, and they were so much closer. Ignoring the pain exploding in her knee, Claire broke out into a run, not waiting to see if her friends followed, knowing they would be right behind her. She waved her hands and yelled at the walkers, anything to draw them away from Castiel. A gunshot passed right by her ear, taking out one of the dead closing in on Castiel.

Her foot caught on something. She tripped, scratching her hands and knees on broken asphalt. Scrambling to her feet, not caring that her hands were bleeding, Claire screamed at the walkers, “Get away from him! Get away!”

It was too late. The walkers didn’t stop. They never, ever stopped, especially not when their target was so tantalizingly within their grasp. Screams of horror broke out when the dead descended on Castiel, coming down like locusts, frenzied and ravenous.

The noises that came out of Claire's mouth were nothing short of animalistic. She reached the walker bent over Castiel's head just in time for it to look up, a long string of flesh dangling from its mouth. Screaming, furious, Claire killed it and shoved it away. The rest of them didn't stand a chance, but the damage had already been done.

Breathing hard, vision blurring, Claire fell to her knees. It was incredible how fast those slow, shambling monsters were when they fed. There was so much blood, so much more than any human body could lose. Her hand fisted in Castiel's coat, the one she'd given him back on the ship, and that he had refused to part with, even after it had been damaged.

Claire looked over her shoulder, at her friends. "I don't know what to do," she said in a strangled voice.

Enid's face was a mask of horror. She took a step back. "Oh, God." Then she turned on her heels and fled.

Scott chased after her. "Enid, wait!"

Face sealed, Carl knelt down next to Castiel. He began *shoving* Castiel's guts back into his body. He didn't hesitate. He didn't even blink. He just continued putting Castiel together like a crude, human-shaped puzzle. "He's gonna live," Carl simply said, face speckled with Castiel's blood.

"I'm gonna be sick." Mikey stumbled, throwing up all over his shoes in his haste to get away.

Carl glanced up at Claire. "Remember what he said. It's just a body."

Swallowing hard, Claire nodded. She dropped her ear to Castiel's chest, ignoring the blood and gore. She couldn't hear his heartbeat, but with Carl's machinations, and Judith's hysterical crying in the background, it didn't have to mean anything. Somewhere far away, Claire could hear shambling footsteps as more walkers encroached on them. Jake fought them off, buying them time.

An idea struck her. The bullet! The angel-killing bullet!

Claire pried under Castiel's coat, looking for the wound where the bullet had pierced his shoulder. Gritting her teeth, she dug in with her dirty fingernails. She couldn't help but stare searchingly at Castiel's face, looking for a hint of pain. His expression was oddly peaceful except for the chunk missing out of it. Claire's fingers slipped in the wound, but she felt it. It was there! The bullet!

"Knife!" Claire snapped at Carl.

Claire didn't want to use her own blade, an angel blade, to pierce Castiel's skin. Carl didn't understand what she was doing, but he trusted her enough to hand it over. She dug into the wound with Carl's knife. The bullet didn't want to come out at first, but with determination, Claire managed to dig it out. She held it in between her fingers, studying it. The blood dripped away from it easily, leaving a twisted clump of shiny metal. It looked to be made of the same strange silvery metal as her angel blade.

Claire looked down at Castiel's face, waiting for the ugly wound to magically knit itself before her eyes. "Come on," she whispered. "Please."

Nothing happened. Frustrated, Claire threw the bullet as far away as she could, letting out a shrill scream of anguish.

Suddenly, Castiel lurched up, spitting up blood. He coughed once, twice, and then dropped back down, eyes closed. He didn't wake up, and he wasn't healing, but… he was breathing. Raspy breaths that rattled in his chest, but still breathing. Claire stared at him, trembling.

Enid's voice calling out to her snapped her back to reality. She spun around, realizing Scott and Enid were running back to them, carrying something large between them. It was a stretcher, Claire realized, a lump rising in her throat. Enid hadn't abandoned her. She went to find the ambulance they'd stumbled on last night.

Enid crashed down to her knees beside them, leaving the stretcher with Scott. She dropped a bag to the ground, stuffed full of medical supplies. “How can I help?” she asked, eyes wide.

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The road seemed to stretch on forever, cut in the middle of a thick, green forest. They barely spoke a word to each other, exhausted and aching. It was possible they were headed in the wrong direction; they didn’t have a map, or the bandwidth to search for one. It didn’t seem so important as just getting out of that ruined town.

The road was eerily quiet; no chirping birds, or buzzing insects, no sounds beyond Castiel’s labored breathing, and the leaves crunching beneath their trudging footsteps. Even the air was still. It was as though nature itself had been left in a daze.

Scott was helping Claire walk. The pulsing pain in her knee was becoming impossible to ignore, yet Claire intended to do just that. It didn’t help that her stomach was rolling, or that shivers kept sending jitters up her spine.

“Do you need a break?” Scott asked softly.

Claire shook her head minutely, a decision she instantly regretted. “I’m fine. Just keep walking.”

“Are you sure?” Scott didn’t bother to mask his concern. One of his hands was curled around her waist, supporting her weight. He brought his other hand to her forehead. “You look like the dead,” he said, mouth twitching in a crooked smile.

“I said I’m fine, grandma.” Claire slapped his hand away. She sighed. “It’s just… it’s been a day.”

Claire stole a furtive look at Castiel, carried along on the stretcher by Jake and Carl. They’d bundled him up as best as they could, with staples and bandages and everything else they

could find. Covered up with his own coat, his injuries were not as startling anymore, but the bandage around his throat was soaked through, and there was no hiding that horrible bite mark on his cheek, a chunk of it missing entirely.

"Don't worry," said Scott, catching her staring. He gave her a small smile. "I'm sure he just needs to rest. Soon he'll be as good as new, just like last time. You'll see."

Jake was not so delicate. "He's not healing like last time." He stared at the road ahead as he spoke, expression unreadable. "What if he dies? Are we gonna have a superpowered dead guy on our hands?"

"He's not going to die," Carl spoke calmly.

Claire looked away. She worried her dry, peeling lip between her teeth. Her mind raced with possibilities. Castiel's sickness had been the result of an overabundance of power. He'd *leveled a town* setting loose to all that power. Where did that leave him? Was he human? Something close to human? Angels couldn't turn, Claire was sure of that. Even animals couldn't turn. But Castiel was, for all intents and purposes, wearing a human body. *Could* he turn, then? Would that mean that Castiel was already dead, and all they were doing was lugging around his empty, dying shell?

The silence was broken by the unmistakable sound of a car heading toward them. They froze, knowing they were nowhere near in shape for a fight.

"Into the woods," Carl shot, already pivoting Castiel's stretcher off the road. "Quickly!"

Gritting her teeth, Claire turned to follow, but she stumbled when Scott suddenly let her go. "What are you doing?" she hissed.

The car appeared around the bend in the road. Claire recognized it instantly as one of the Hunters' cars. It upped its speed, hurtling toward them. Scott stared down at the approaching vehicle calmly. With confident, practiced movements, Scott went down on one knee and pressed the rifle's stock to his shoulder, slightly adjusting his aim. Then he fired.

The car's front tire exploded. The hunters swerved out of control, tires screeching. Without taking a pause, Scott stood up and released another bullet, this time meeting the driver square in the forehead. The car lost control, running into the shrubbery, wheels still turning under the dead driver's foot. Scott lifted his rifle again, taking a step forward. This time, however, his rifle made a loud noise of protest.

"Damn dust!" Scott huffed.

The car's back doors opened. A man began to crawl out, a pistol grasped in his hand. "Scott," Claire hissed, grabbing her friend's arm. She wasn't about to test their luck any further.

Scott ducked under her arm. "Okay, okay." Helping Claire with her injured knee, they went into the woods, running to catch up with the others.

As they ran, Claire had only one thing to say to him: "Scott, what the fuck."

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The group kept going until they couldn't go anymore, all but collapsing in pain and exhaustion. If they thought they had been lost before, there was no longer any doubt. Whatever *wrongness* Claire had sensed before had ebbed away, but it didn't make the woods any less creepy come nightfall. Even exhausted as they were, falling asleep seemed nigh impossible. Their nerves were wrecked. Every so often Mikey would get up and pace, looking around like he was waiting for his night vision to kick in, setting them all on edge.

Carl, having had enough, finally grabbed Mikey's hand and yanked him down. "Will you relax?" he said, huffing. "You're making everybody nervous."

Mikey rubbed his wrist, glaring. "It's not like we're out of the woods yet."

"Ha ha." Carl rolled his one eye.

“You know what I meant.”

Carl didn’t respond, just turned his face away. He’d been in a strange mood since they’d clawed their way out of that basement. Claire peered at him, furrowing her brows. Carl had never been a particularly tactile person, except maybe with Judith, but now he seemed especially unapproachable. A hard person. Claire sighed, not wanting to press the issue. She might never get the image of Carl elbow-deep in Castiel’s guts out of her head.

The night grew colder, and Claire found herself beginning to shiver. Lighting a fire was out of the question, not with those Hunters still lurking about.  Either way, as their grumbling stomachs constantly reminded them, it wasn’t like they had anything to cook.

Noticing her shivering, Jake threw a hoodie at Claire’s head. “What? You look cold.”

Claire swallowed a smile, well versed with Jake's particular brand of empathy. She lifted the hoodie to her face, giving it a perfunctory sniff. It was several sizes too big, letting off a musty sort of smell that vaguely reminded Claire of her grandmother’s house. She put it on anyway. "Thanks."

He waved it off. "Don't wanna deal with your sick ass, s'all."

Claire burrowed deeper into the hoodie. She couldn't seem to stop shivering. "Don't worry, I don't get sick. Can't remember the last time I got so much as a cold."

Enid leaned over to give her a side-armed hug. "'Cause you're Wolverine." Her smile wavered. "Are you sure you're okay? You look a bit, I dunno, off."

Claire rolled her eyes. "Why does everyone keep asking me that? I'm fine." She poked her finger between Enid's eyebrows, right under the nasty gash that's been swelling there, giving her a rather unfortunate double forehead. "You don't look so hot yourself."

Enid winced a little. "Fair."

"I think it's a good look," Jake said, snickering. "Now you're like, brainey."

"What, are you jealous?" Enid shot back.

Claire rolled her eyes, secretly glad her friends were well enough to bicker. Perhaps it meant things weren't as bad as they seemed. She shifted a little, the movement sending a jolt of pain up her knee. Wincing, Claire reached down to take her boot off, hoping it might relieve some of the pressure. Her fingers passed over a hole in her jeans, right above her ankle. The skin there felt bruised, hot to the touch.

Frowning, Claire rolled up her pant leg. What she found made her freeze, the blood draining from her face.

"What is it?" Enid asked, bumping Claire with her shoulder.

Claire didn't respond. Her fingers ghosted over the wound. It was barely a graze. The skin was only slightly broken. But there was no mistaking it for anything than what it was:

A bitemark.

Chapter End Notes

I'm very sorry.

# Living Dead Girl

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Carl carefully lowered Judith to the ground, taking care not to jostle her. He hoped she would sleep through what he was about to do. It wasn't likely.

"Get a tourniquet," Carl said firmly, "and something for her to bite on." He pulled out the long carving knife he'd been carrying since they'd left New Jersey. Cutting through the Tibia bone would be difficult, but not impossible.

No one moved. His friends stared at him, stunned.

"What?" Claire whispered in horror, gaze flicking to the knife in his hand. "No!"

They stared at one another for a moment. Carl's hand tightened on the carving knife. The sickness spread quickly. First, she'd get weaker, with flu-like symptoms. Headaches, a sore throat, fatigue. Plenty of people would still be in denial at that stage, but once symptoms set in, the person would be as good as dead. A fever would soon follow, mild at first, but persistent, cooking the body from within. There was no time to waste. The only solution was to remove the infected limb before the poison spread itself throughout Claire's body.

His gaze flickered to the bag next to Claire's feet. They'd depleted most of their medical supplies taking care of Castiel, but the bag still held some alcohol, as well as an arterial tourniquet. It wasn't nearly enough, but Claire was strong. She'd survive it. He knew she would. He just hoped that she'd forgive him one day.

"It's the only way," Carl said before he lunged for the bag.

Claire managed to snatch it from under his hands. "I said no!" she shouted, throwing the bag as far as she could, scattering its precious contents on the ground. "You're not chopping my leg off, *you psycho*. What the hell's wrong with you?"

“It’s too late for that, man,” Jake said quietly, coming to stand between them. He took Carl’s shoulder. “C’mon. You’re freaking her out.”

“It’s not too late,” Carl gritted out. He shoved Jake away, harder than he had intended.

Jake stumbled back but didn’t fall. He held up his hands, a guarded look on his face. “Alright, take it easy.”

Carl shook his head. He forced down the rising lump in his throat. Taking a deep breath, he turned back to his friend, pleading, “*Please*, Claire. You’ll die.”

“Get the fuck away from me,” Claire spat out. She tried to stand, but her legs gave out from under her. Scott tentatively reached over to help her, but she shoved his hand away roughly. Shivering, she grabbed her head, hair clutched between her fingers. “Oh, God,” she moaned, huddling into herself, bringing her knees to her chest and rocking slightly.

Carl’s shoulders slumped, the fight draining from his body. To his horror, his eye became blurry with tears. He wiped at it angrily with the hand still holding his knife. He wasn’t the only one getting choked up. The teenagers crowded around Claire, none of them knowing what to say. Claire flinched when Enid tried to hug her, snapping at them not to touch her. Enid wrapped her arms around herself instead, weeping silently.

“I’m sorry,” Carl said after several long moments, his voice cracking. “I just…”

Claire jerked her head up, glaring. “Ask first, asshole.” She sniffed, scrubbing at her face clumsily. She took long, shuddering breaths, trying to calm herself down. “It’s too late anyway. I think… I think it happened yesterday.” She nodded to herself. “I’m so stupid, I didn’t even notice it till now.”

Enid gasped. Her hand flew to her mouth. “It was that hunter I shot, wasn’t it? Oh, God, I didn’t…”

Claire tried to smile. Her mouth quivered. “Hey, it was a good shot.”

Enid stared at Claire in horror. “I killed you.”

“I’m not dead yet,” Claire said softly. Untucking her legs, Claire rolled down her pant leg, covering up the small bitemark above her ankle. She looked around at her friends. Some of them were still openly crying. “Pity Party’s over, alright? It is what it is.” Her voice shook, but she squared her shoulders, putting on a tough appearance.

“Shit,” Jake said softly, coming to sit beside Claire. He sniffed a little, pulling at his nose. “I just realized - this never would’ve happened if you’d actually worn those damned rain boots.”

“You guys never listen to me,” Mikey said sadly.

Claire burst into giggles. It was such as unexpected sound that it even caught Claire by surprise. She hid her tear-streaked face in her hands, still giggling. She was then besieged by a bout of hiccups, each one rattling her frame. Jake thumped her helpfully on the back.

“Cut it out,” she grunted, elbowing him away. “You’re not helping.”

Jake snorted. “Least I’m not trying to cut your damn leg off.”

Carl shot him a glare.

Claire laughed again, still hiccuping. She gave Jake a nudge with her shoulder, jostling him a little. “Looks like you’re gonna have to deal with my sick ass after all.”

Jake grimaced. “You know I didn’t really mean that.”

“I know,” Claire said softly. The laughter drained from her eyes, as quickly as it had appeared. Her gaze shifted to where Castiel was lying on a stretcher, unconscious and injured. “I thought… maybe Cas could…” she trailed off, biting her lip, not daring to voice her hope out loud.

Silence fell on the group. She didn’t have to say it out loud. Carl knew what Claire was thinking. What they were all thinking. Maybe, once Castiel woke up, he’d make things right again. He’d brought Judith back from the dead, after all. What was a tiny little bite in comparison? He said he couldn’t heal anybody, but… that was before. And Claire was important to Castiel, they all knew that.

But then, Castiel would have to wake up first. He’d have to be okay. He’d have to be able to fight off this sickness that had ruined all of their lives time and time again. Castiel was in pretty bad shape after the explosion. Not to mention the walkers tearing into him. His wounds were severe. Anybody else would’ve turned already, but Castiel wasn’t just anybody, was he? Carl had no doubt in his mind that he’d recover. He would save Claire. He had to.

“Cas will fix this,” Carl said firmly, nodding his head. He resheathed his knife before kneeling down in front of Claire, meeting her gaze. “He *will*, you’ll see. You have to hold on, Claire.”

“I don’t know if I can,” she said with a small sigh.

“Some people last days,” Carl reminded her gently. “You’re *strong*, Claire. You can do it. Just hold on.”

Claire’s eyes glistened. Her breath hitched suddenly, and she drew her hand to her mouth, gasping a little. All her bravado slipped away when she whispered, begging, “Don’t let me turn into one of those things.”

“You won’t,” Carl said resolutely, meeting her gaze. There was a murmur of agreement from the others.

Privately, in his mind, Carl sent a prayer to Castiel. He asked for nothing. He didn't even urge Castiel to hurry up and recover. Castiel needed time to heal. Carl knew - *he knew* - Castiel wouldn't let them down. So he prayed, not to ask for anything, but to make a promise that he wouldn't let anything happen to Claire. Not to any of them.

No one was going to die. Not on Carl's watch.

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They took turns standing guard for the rest of the night. Carl didn't end up getting much sleep; something scuttered around in the branches overhead every time he managed to doze off. Then, just before dawn, they spotted real movement. Pinpricks of light in the distance, growing larger and brighter with every passing moment. Hoping they had not yet been spotted, they left in a hurry, gathering up the children and picking up Castiel's stretcher.

They kept going even as the sun rose. Every time they stopped to rest, something creaked or rustled behind them. It might have been animals or even walkers, but they didn't want to stick around long enough to find out. They were in no shape to fight.

The crisp morning air felt sharp in Carl's lungs. The woods seemed to stretch on forever, until finally, up ahead, a road was coming into view. Carl hastened his steps, Judith's weight heavy in his aching arms. But then, something suddenly occurred to him. Something that made him stop in his tracks. It occurred to him that for hunters, the Hunters were not exactly acting stealthy.

"What is it?" Enid said, pulling next to him, her breaths coming fast. She'd been carrying Castiel's stretcher together with Scott at her back.

"They're herding us," Carl told her, frustrated, staring at the road up ahead. He'd bet his life that there were men there, waiting for them. "We're walking into a trap."

Enid gave a nod to Scott over her shoulder. Gently, they lowered Castiel to the ground. He was extremely pale in the light of day; as if all the blood had drained from his body. He was still alive, however. Still breathing.

“Fuck this,” said Claire, slumping to the ground. Her skin glistened in the morning light. Her knee was still bothering her. She’d been leaning on Mikey for the past couple of hours. “Of course they know we’re here,” Claire said, pained and irritable. “They’ve got that spectrometer thing. They’re tracking us.”

Enid frowned. “I don’t think that’s what they called it.”

Claire’s answering look suggested that she didn’t actually give a fuck.

“Now what?” Scott asked, rubbing the tension out of his shoulder. Castiel was heavy. They’d been taking turns carrying him.

In Carl’s arms, Judith gave a few pitiful whimpers. She was hungry, he knew. Judith never cried out of hunger. Hadn’t done so since she’d been a little baby. Carl shushed her, apologetic. To his friends, he said, “We can’t stay here.”

“Something doesn’t sit right,” said Enid, squinting in the direction they just came from.

“What’s on your mind?” Carl wondered. He could practically see the gears in Enid’s brain turning.

“I think they’re scared of us,” Enid spoke like she was trying the idea out loud. She bit at her fingernail, frowning to herself. “Or, Cas, I guess. I mean, look what happened last time.” She turned to Claire. “That English guy, Victor. He was going to do something to Cas. He said he needed blood.”

Claire’s mouth thinned. “Yeah, so?”

“For what?” Carl asked. He set Judith down, giving his arms a break. He couldn’t help but look around, waiting for someone to jump out at them. Nobody did, even though they’d been

chased all morning. Why weren't the Hunters coming after them?

Enid shrugged. "A spell? I don't know. He was planning something." She began to pace a little, taking a few steps here and there. "That's just it, though. It was just him, Victor. The others were *scared*. You could tell they were. I think that's why they're not really chasing us. They're trying to lead back in the open. Victor was missing a leg, wasn't he? That peg leg he was wearing was *shit*. It must hurt like crazy just walking around. He's not gonna come running into the woods. I think they're trying to steer us toward him."

The teenagers mulled over that for a moment. Something cracked behind them, making them jump. "Let's get out of here," said Mikey, anxious. Like all of them, he looked rough and tired, covered in sweat and dust. "Just - go somewhere else instead. A different direction."

Jake bent down to pick up Judith, giving Carl's arms some respite. "So now what?" he asked as they walked, looking around furtively. "We just stay in the woods? For how long?"

"It's a big park," Enid answered, grimacing.

A gun went off somewhere. It was hard to tell where. A flock of birds soared off above them, making their displeasure known. They all dropped to the ground on instinct. Oliver tripped and scraped his elbow, leaving blood dripping down his arm. The little boy looked at it with a quivering lip but didn't make a sound. Enid and Scott managed to keep a hold of Castiel's stretcher. The coat they'd covered Castiel with slipped halfway off his body.

A minute passed. Nothing else happened. No one came after them.

"Fucking assholes," Claire hissed. She stood up slowly, leaning on a tree for support. She breathed in deeply, closing her eyes. "Wait," she said, eyes flying open. "They're not tracking us. They're tracking *him* ." She pointed at Castiel, lying unconscious on the stretcher. "That device, the spectro-whatever, they were using it to track, like, angel heatwaves."

Carl had a vague idea of where Claire was going with this. "So what?"

“So *I’ll* stay back here with Cas. The rest of you can run to Alexandria. You guys get the kids out of here, then come back with help.” Claire grinned suddenly, adding, “Maybe bring that rocket launcher you were telling me about.”

“That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard,” Jake said flatly.

Claire punched him in the shoulder.

“Ow.” Jake rubbed his shoulder, wincing. “Aren’t you supposed to be dying?”

“It’s a good idea,” Claire insisted. “And it’ll be faster for you. Me and Cas are slowing you down.”

Carl was shaking his head before Claire could finish her sentence. “Absolutely not.”

Enid added, “We’re not leaving you alone here. Are you crazy?”

“Fever’s getting to her,” Jake muttered. He backed away when Claire raised her fist again, holding up his hands in surrender. “I’m joking! I’m joking!”

“Splitting up is always a bad idea. Haven’t you ever seen a horror movie?” Mikey said with a heavy frown. He glanced around, conscious of the Hunters' presence nearby.

Claire rolled her eyes. “This isn’t a horror movie, Mikey. Or any kind of movie. And it’s not some kinda ‘*woe is me, leave me behind to die*’ sort of thing, either. Fuck no. I wanna live. You assholes are coming back for me. I’ll haunt you if you don’t.” She turned to Enid. “Victor’s too chickenshit to come into the woods. You said so yourself.”

“It’s just a theory,” Enid pointed out. “I’m not about to bet your life on it.”

“I also have a dumb idea,” Carl said, frowning down at Castiel. The angel’s expression was peaceful, despite the ugly bitemark on his face. “We know they’re following us. We know they’ve got a way to track Cas.” He lowered his voice slightly. It didn’t seem like the Hunters were in hearing distance, but he didn’t want to take any chances. “Some of us could break off, cause some kind of distraction. If they're too busy to follow us, we might be able to slip away.”

“What kind of distraction?” Claire asked, her eyes narrowing.

“Walkers?” Carl suggested with a one-shouldered shrug. “There’s that herd we left under a bridge. Can’t be that far.”

“We don’t even know where we are right now,” Enid pointed out.

“We do,” Scott interrupted. He didn’t seem happy about it.

Jake’s gaze snapped to his brother. He worked his jaw for a moment, shaking his head minutely. Scott returned his gaze evenly. They seemed to be in the midst of a silent, secret conversation.

“What?” Carl asked, glancing between the two.

“We need a distraction, Jake,” Scott told his brother apologetically.

“What is it?” Claire demanded, impatient.

Scott closed his eyes briefly. “You said these guys hunt monsters, right? Well, I say we give ‘em one.” His mouth curved in a joyless smile, adding, “This is Saviors’ territory.”

Chapter End Notes

Please drop a review to yell at me about these last few chapters. That'd be really swell :)

# Dance, Fuckers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Michonne sat on a wooden bench. She'd taken off Carl's hat, setting it down on the seat beside her. Her sword was leaning on the bench's backrest. She held a glass Tupperware container in her lap, a parting gift from King Ezekiel and his people.

Using her thumb, she scraped the bottom of the bowl. Michonne sucked the last few crumbs into her mouth, chasing the buttery, tangy sweetness. The taste melted on her tongue, hitting all the right spots. The Kingdom and its king might've been a complete and utter farce in her eyes, but their peach cobbler was divine.

"Now there's something to look at," she told Carl's hat, gazing at the view spread out before her. She'd always loved a good roadside overlook.

According to the sign by the old-fashioned mounted binoculars, Michonne was looking at Durmont State Park. It was a beautiful view, well worth the climb. Morgan had taken her halfway up the mountain, on a beautiful mount with a sleek, shiny coat. It had needed a bit of coaxing, much like Morgan himself. He'd been reluctant to leave the Kingdom, even just to offer her a ride.

The horses had been spooked. Michonne herself, also.

Setting the Tupperware aside, Michonne took a few steps closer to the overlook's edge. Mindlessly, she lifted a hand to the coin-operated binoculars, scratching at the peeling paint with her fingernail. Her brow furrowed as she took in the scenic view before her. The sign told her that the town resting at the foot of the mountain was called Durmont as well. Apparently, it's been named as such because of its proximity to the state park.

Except it wasn't there anymore. Beneath her, the town lay in ruins.

Uneasy, Michonne made her way down the mountain. It didn't look any better up close. The silence was unnerving, almost as much as the unnatural chill emanating from the ground. There was a strange stillness to the air. Michonne kept a hand on her sword at all times, ready to draw it at the first sign of trouble. Something inside of her screamed at her to run away. Yet she was also drawn to it, irresistibly so. She'd never felt anything like it before.

Beneath a pile of splintered wood and metal, something stirred. Michonne took a step back as a shriveled hand emerged from the ruins, green-tinted fingernails scrabbling for purchase in the dirt. Curious, she grabbed the walker's wrist and pulled it forward, bringing its face out into the light. The creature stared back at her with blackened, hollow eyes. Brown liquid seeped from its empty sockets. Michonne shuddered and released the walker's wrist, backing away from the hissing, blinded creature.

What the hell happened here?

Michonne knew the Saviors' compound, the place they called Sanctuary, wasn't all that far. That couldn't have been a coincidence, but at the same time, it was hard to believe the Saviors had anything to do with it. To have this kind of power… was unimaginable.

King Ezekiel knew. Michonne was sure of it. He alone had been unaffected by the phenomenon, even as Michonne and the rest of the Kingdom writhed in pain. Had it been a bomb? A weapon of some kind? If she had a Geiger counter, would it be screaming at her right now? Whatever it was, King Ezekiel had refused to say. Michonne couldn't make him, not with his loyal subjects watching her every move.

As she was coming around a crushed ambulance, Michonne suddenly froze. She could hear voices up ahead. Lucky for her, there was no shortage of cover around.

A black man with a hollow face was puttering around in the rubble. "It was here," he said to his two companions, a man and a woman.

The woman placed her hand on his shoulder. "Reggie, come on. I know you want to give Tim the right send-off, but he's gone, sweetheart."

Reggie’s voice stuttered. “He deserves a Hunter’s funeral, Audrey.” Struck by grief, he crumpled to the ground.

Audrey sighed. Respectfully, she took a few steps back, coming to stand beside the other, younger man. Michonne crept closer, careful not to make any noise. She stopped behind a half-collapsed wall, so close she could reach out and touch the woman’s brown hair if she wanted to.

"Give him a moment," Audrey told her companion.

"Poor Reggie," the man said, watching Reggie grieve. “Damn tragedy, what happened to Janklow. Ain’t right, shooting a man in the chest. In this day n’ age?” He shook his head.

“Killed by a little girl,” Audrey sighed in disgust, crossing her arms. “What a waste.”

"We'll get her," the blond man said darkly, adjusting his cap. “And all her little friends too. You heard one of ‘em kids got Rudy while he been driving? Wham. Right between the eyebrows.” He shuffled his foot. "Y’know, Willerd says they've got a little baby with 'em."

Audrey snorted. "Willerd's an idiot. And if you ask me, we should be going after them now. We’re wasting time.”

“You heard *His Majesty*,” her companion replied, voice dripping with disdain, “*It* is still alive, or it woulda left something behind. Wing marks, or somethin’.”

“That a fact?”

He shrugged. “Heard it from Turner, and *he* heard it from Singer back in the day. Between you and me, His Majesty is messing with some bad joojoo. I don’t want nothin’ to do with it.”

Michonne's eyes narrowed.  Who was this "Majesty"? Did they mean Ezekiel? Michonne didn't trust the man, but he didn't strike her as the kind to go after children. And the baby they mentioned - could they possibly mean Judith? What was happening here, exactly?

The woman chuckled lightly. "Victor's a prissy asshole, I'll give you that, but he's damn useful. Do you know he has an eidetic memory? Man's a walking search engine."

"Says him. He makes half the shit up, and you know it."

Teeth bared, Michonne stepped out of the shadows. The two didn't notice her under she was ripping her sword through the air, slicing their calves in a single upturned stroke. She grabbed the woman from behind, cutting the man's head clean off as he turned around, then raised her sword to the woman's throat. Audrey struggled, her hand reaching for the gun holstered at her thigh. She was clumsy and in pain. Michonne snatched the gun right out of her hand.

Reggie's gun was already drawn, but he was too late. He hesitated, knowing he couldn't shoot Michonne without hitting Audrey as well.

Audrey struggled in Michonne's hold. "Shoot her, Reggie!"

Taking advantage of Reggie's hesitation, Michonne fired Audrey's gun. She screamed as Reggie fell to the ground, dead.

"Lucky," Michonne whispered in Audrey's ear. Her muscles flexed as she kept the struggling woman in her grasp. "I'm usually not that good of a shot." She lifted her sword upwards, forcing her captive to stand on her tiptoes, one leg threatening to slip under her. Once again whispering in the woman's ear, every word bitten out, Michonne said, "Tell me where they are."

Audrey let out a short, bitter laugh. "I'm not telling you a goddamn thing, you stupid bitch."

Michonne breathed in slowly. With the children's lives at stake, there was very little she was not willing to do. "We'll see."

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It wasn't quick and it wasn't pretty, but eventually, the woman told Michonne everything she needed to know.

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The hilly road to Sanctuary stretched on for miles. The twins led the way, Carl in tow. They'd barely spoken a word to him since their departure, radiating tension in waves. Carl couldn't blame them. He didn't envy them, either. He knew how hard it was for them to go back there, back to their old home.

Spotting a walker, Carl slowed his stride. The creature stood listlessly on the side of the road, staring into the dense woods with clouded eyes. Carl whistled, catching its attention. It did not disappoint, letting out a low growl as it noticed him. Knife in hand, Carl waited for the walker to approach, only to be sidelined when it was taken out by a crowbar to the side of the head instead.

"I had it," Carl grumbled in protest, watching Jake finish it off.

"Yeah, yeah." Jake's crowbar had gotten stuck in the creature's skull. He pressed his foot to its chest, grunting as he pulled his weapon free. "You can have the next one. Let's go already."

Carl did get the next one; it was just a kid, not that much bigger than Oliver. Carl let it fall to the ground and tried not to think about it anymore. The bodies served a purpose. They were making a point to lure walkers to the middle of the road, leaving breadcrumbs in the form of decaying corpses. With any luck, the Saviors would take the bait.

“Is it much farther?” Carl asked, wiping the blade on his thigh. It wasn’t like his clothes could get any dirtier.

Scott shook his head. “No far,” he said, eyeing the dead child-walker with a grimace. He wasn’t exactly helping out with the breadcrumbs situation, but Carl didn’t have the energy to press that particular button. “We’ll cut through the woods on the way back,” Scott added needlessly. It wasn't as if they hadn’t already discussed the plan at length.

Jake cut in, turning to his brother, “Remember, you’re only gonna pop a few windows. *Don’t kill anyone*. We don’t wanna piss ‘em off more than we have to.” His eyes narrowed. “Don’t get distracted.”

Scott scoffed, rolling his eyes. His fingers slid over the stock of his rifle in an almost loving caress. “Yes, mother.”

“No distractions,” Carl echoed in agreement.

They weren’t planning on getting too close to the compound, just close enough to get the Saviors' attention. It was risky, doing it in broad daylight, but they didn’t have the luxury of time. Every now and then they’d overhear the rumble of car engines. The Hunters were still around, and sooner or later they were going to lose patience waiting for their friends and Castiel to come out of the woods.

The trek up the hilly road progressed in silence. Carl couldn’t help but feel a little exposed, out here in the open. He couldn’t be sure they hadn’t been followed, even when their entire plan hinged on it.

He hoped the others were doing okay. Before they’d left, the twins had led them to a cabin close to the forest's edge. It had been part of a rest stop for hikers, once upon a time. Someone had looted it quite thoroughly already. Its toilets were flooded, and vines slithered in between the planks, but it had four walls and a roof, and under the circumstances, was better than nothing.

Keeping the Hunters at bay was key. Enid had found some red paint inside the cabin, which had given her the idea to paint protective sigils on the outer walls of the cabin for them to see. The Hunters were a superstitious lot, they knew that much.

"I helped Cas make these wards before," Enid had explained, reminding them of the brief time they'd spent at a military base in New Jersey. She had used a dirty hand towel in place of a paintbrush, spilling blots of blood-red paint on the ground. "I can't remember *exactly* what they looked like, but…"

"Don't worry about it," Carl had told her. He'd picked up some paint and started making up symbols of his own. They were nonsense, of course. He didn't have a clue about magic, but he'd done his best to make it look legitimately spooky. "As long as it keeps them away for a bit, we'll be fine."

He'd given Enid his last bullet before he and the twins snuck away. They'd left Judith bawling her eyes out, Claire doing her best to shush her even as she herself looked pale and shaky. They'd snuck out the backdoor, crawling through thick underbrush. It was a miracle they hadn't been spotted; the Hunters were blocking the roads leading out of the woods. Luckily, their attention was on the cabin. Carl, Jake, and Scott had managed to get away unseen.

"We're nearly there," Jake's voice brought Carl back to reality.

They reached an industrial area of some sort; a depressing maze of rusting metal and huge blocks of concrete. One structure loomed ahead, grey and menacing, with active chimneys that spewed black smoke into the atmosphere. Carl didn't have to ask. It was obvious that the eyesore was the Saviors' compound, the place they called Sanctuary.

"How many people live here, again?" asked Carl, peeking around a corner. The place was massive.

Jake's voice was hushed. "Few hundreds here, few more in the outposts. Heads up," he said, ducking under a hole in a chain link fence before lifting it, allowing Carl and his brother to pass. He led them to a warehouse of some kind, long abandoned by the looks of it. "This is as close as we're gonna get."

“It’s way too far,” Scott protested, scrunching his nose. He eyed the rickety outer stairs that led to the warehouse’s rooftop. “Not sure I can hit anything from this distance.”

Jake huffed. “Figure it out. We come any closer and they’ll be on us before we make it back out.”

They climbed up to the roof. The staircase shuddered and creaked under their weight, making far too much noise to their liking. The rooftop offered a semi-unobscured view of the Saviors’ compound. One major problem with their plan quickly became apparent.

“What’s with all the broken windows?” Carl queried, squinting his eye in the sunlight. They came all this way intending to shoot out a few windows, just enough to draw the Saviors' attention. There were plenty of windows to choose from; the building was covered in them. The only problem was the distinct lack of glass.

Jake frowned. “I dunno.” They were lying side by side on the warehouse’s rooftop, trying their best to remain unseen. Jake looked at Carl, eyebrow raised. “You think they felt Cas-a-Nova all the way out here?”

“I’ll figure something out,” Scott grunted. He crawled away from them, muttering something about finding the best spot. He had quite a long distance to cover, after all.

From his vantage point, Carl observed the compound with interest. He could see the main factory building with its large courtyard. There were people moving around in the yard. No, not people. Walkers. Dozens of them, shuffling about or hanging from the fences. Some were even mounted on spikes. As he watched, several people entered the yard, all wearing similar beige clothing. They carried buckets and long poles. To Carl’s amazement, they began *feeding* the walkers.

“What the hell are they doing?” Carl whispered in shock.

“It’s punishment,” Jake answered with a grimace of disdain. “Most of ‘em used to be Saviors. The dead ones, I mean. It’s what they do to you if you break the rules. Workers are the ones trying to earn an extra chance.” His jaw tightened. “Scott spent six months in there, you know.”

He didn’t know. Carl’s stomach sank. “What happened?”

A few moments passed before Jake replied. “It was a long time ago,” he said, stuttering a little. “My family decided to make a run for it. My dad, cousins, my older brother and sister… and Scott.”

Carl ran his tongue over his teeth. His mouth was dry. “But not you?”

“I didn’t *want* to leave, man. I thought they were crazy. And I was right - everyone was killed, everyone except Scott. Negan gave him another shot, you know? So he took it. Stayed in the yard, took care of them till his punishment was over.” He scowled and jerked his chin, gesturing. “See the dead one in the corner? The one in the green shirt, with a bucket on his head?... that’s our dad.”

Carl swallowed. “I’m sorry.”

Jake chuckled darkly. “I’m not. He was a bastard.”

There was nothing more to be said. They watched the workers wrestle the walkers for a little while longer. The sun was close to setting. After some time, Scott gave them the OK signal, telling them he’d finally picked a spot. Except he didn’t open fire. Jake and Carl exchanged a questioning look.

“What are you doing?” Carl whispered once he'd crawled over to Scott.

“Yeah,” Jake echoed in annoyance. “We don’t got all day.”

Scott looked up from his sights, frowning. “I’m picking a target.”

Jake scowled at his brother. “Well, hurry up. We need to get the hell out of here.”

Scott scoffed. “I *would* - if you two assholes would stop distracting me. Go downstairs, Jake. Keep an eye out for trouble.” He rolled his eyes, adding, “Make yourself useful for once.”

“Don’t kill anyone, asshole,” Jake muttered, but he did as he was asked.

Carl followed, leaving Scott alone in his sniper’s nest on the roof. The staircase was just as noisy on the descent. “Just give him a minute,” Carl offered, used to the brothers’ bickering.

As his feet hit the ground, Jake opened his mouth for what was probably going to be a scathing reply. Then his eyes widened. Taking it as a cue, Carl whipped around, pulling his gun from his waistband.

“Who are you?” Carl demanded, pistol levied on the stranger. It was completely empty, but the stranger didn’t have to know that.

The blond man seemed just as surprised to see them, but only for a moment. He sneered. “What the fuck are you doing back here?”

“Dwight,” Jake greeted the man shakily. He was holding his hand out placatingly, his grip on his crowbar loose. “Shit, man. Your face.”

Carl frowned. He knew his messed-up face was on full display, but he didn’t care. The stranger was scarred as well, one side of his face twisted up from cheekbone to forehead. Had they met anywhere else, Carl might’ve felt a twinge of sympathy for him. A kinship of some kind, perhaps. But not today. The man was a Savior. And the vest he was wearing… that crossbow… Carl would recognize those anywhere.

“What are you doing with Daryl’s things?” Carl all but growled.

Dwight smirked. “My things now.” He tilted his head, blond hair falling on his scarred face. “I know you - you’re Rick’s kid.” His cold smile widened. “We’ve been looking for you.”

Carl’s stomach sank. “Why’s that?” he asked, keeping his voice steady. He chanced a glance at Jake, who met his gaze briefly. Jake seemed thoroughly shaken.

Dwight chuckled, but he didn’t answer Carl’s question. He turned to Jake. “Where’s your idiot brother?”

“He’s dead,” Jake answered all too quickly. With that tremble in his voice, it wasn’t hard to believe. “Dead ones got to him.”

“Huh.” Dwight worked his jaw, clearly not buying it.

“Come on, D,” Jake said, taking a half-step forward, coming to stand between Carl and this stranger. “Just pretend you never saw us. What are you doing out here, anyway?”

Before Dwight had a chance to respond, four shots went off in quick succession. He flinched, ducking on instinct. His hand flew to his holster. He never got the chance to pull it out. Jake swung hard, bashing him across the face. The crowbar made contact with a sickening crunching sound. Dwight dropped to the ground; he didn't move.

Scott came barreling down the stairs. “I think I got Fat Joey,” he announced in excitement. His gaze fell on Dwight’s crumpled body. “Uh…”

Jake glared back at his brother. His crowbar was dripping. “I told you not to kill anybody!”

“You killed Dwight!” Scott hissed back, incredulous. “What happened?”

“Let’s just get the fuck out of here,” Jake replied anxiously.

Carl bent over Dwight’s body. Blood was pooling under his head. He reached for Daryl’s crossbow, stomach rolling. “We can’t go yet,” Carl said through clenched teeth. The clasp on the crossbow wasn’t giving. “I think they have my friend, Daryl. We have to help him.”

He was just about to get it loose when he was suddenly pulled back. Carl struggled, but Jake was much stronger than him. He pinned Carl to the side of the building, furious.

“Are you crazy?” Jake demanded, eyes wild. “What are you doing? Huh? Are you gonna storm in there on your own? You’ll get both you and your friend killed, dumbass.”

Scott grabbed his brother’s shoulder. “We really have to go,” he said seriously.

“Leave the crossbow,” Jake grunted, giving Carl a shake before releasing him. “I said leave it,” he repeated sharply when he caught Carl eyeing it again. “If they catch you with it, you’re dead. Or worse.”

Clenching his jaw, Carl nodded. They broke off into a run. Already they could hear shouts in the distance, somebody coming to investigate the source of Scott's shooting. They’d find Dwight’s body. They’d be angry. The twins were right - they couldn’t afford to get caught.

The sun was sinking fast. It was getting darker by the minute. They reached the hilly road before long, and immediately took a hard turn left, taking a shortcut straight through the woods. They hoped the Saviors would take the bait and follow the breadcrumbs of dead bodies they'd left behind. Hopefully, they were not the type to ask too many questions.

Adrenaline coursing through their veins, lungs burnings in their chests, the teenagers ran through the dark forest. They heard walkers hissing and growling around them, but didn’t stop to investigate, knowing every second counted. Branches snapped over Carl’s face as he

ran. One hit him in the eye, momentarily rendering him blind. His eye watered as he blinked the pain away, only one thought on his mind - get back to the others, now.

The cabin was coming into sight, just down the hill. Wheezing, Carl grabbed at a thick tree trunk, using it to propel himself forward. His side was on fire. In the distance, they could hear gunshots. Carl and the twins paused to look at one another.

“Hear that?” Carl gasped, smiling a little. Their plan was working!

Jake grinned. His teeth glinted in the moonlight. “Dance, fuckers, dance.”

“*Shit*. Look over there,” Scott hissed.

Carl followed his gaze, breathing hard. He couldn’t make out anything at first; it was so dark. Then he spotted it - a figure moving toward the cabin, silent and creeping. It didn’t notice them at all. Whoever it was, they were heading straight to the cabin. Expression hard, Scott drew up his rifle. It took him a moment to steady his breathing, and his aim.

Suddenly, the shadows around the figure shifted. Recognition hit Carl like a freight train.

“No!” Carl shouted, slamming into Scott. The shot rang into the night’s air, deafening.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, Dwight, no redemption arc for you.

# No Time for a Lullaby

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Using the cover of darkness as her shroud, Michonne made her way to the cabin. Quietly, unnoticed, she slipped past the stakeout by the park's northern entrance. Audrey's friends, no doubt. She spotted a few more of them near the cabin, stalking it. She took care of them swiftly, putting her sword to good use.

Whoever they were, they seemed content enough to wait. For what, Michonne couldn't begin to guess. She didn't think they were Saviors, not really. Audrey hadn't recognized Negan's name.

Whoever they were didn't matter. This was Michonne's first solid lead in weeks. It was a shame she hadn't gotten more out of Audrey. The woman's directions had been accurate, at least, even if she'd become a babbling mess toward the end, spewing nonsense about angels and monsters and whatnot. Michonne had pushed her too hard. She regretted it, but not enough she regretted slitting the woman's throat.

Michonne crept closer to the cabin, uncertain of what lay ahead. A soft light spilled through the cracks in the boards. Even in the dark, Michonne could see the strange markings on the walls. Satanic, Michonne's mother might have said. Perhaps Audrey hadn't been alone in her madness.

As Michonne approached, a child's soft cry flitted to her ears. She would have recognized it anywhere.

*Judith*.

Hope surged through Michonne's body like a lightning bolt. She stalked forward, sword in hand, determined to face whoever it was. Whoever had taken the children, taken them right from her house, in the dead of night, right from under their noses. Furious, longing, Michonne crept toward the cabin. Whoever it was, she swore they would not make it through the night.

Somewhere, not too far away, a fight had broken out. Michonne could hear the gunshots, the yelling. On any other day, she would have either fled or investigated, but now she only had eyes for the cabin.

It wasn't until a gunshot went right by her head that she stopped to duck and roll, spinning around to face her attacker. Her gaze focused on the figure running down the hill, coming right for her. She prepared herself for a fight. Then she froze, her breath caught in her throat, the sword slipping from her grip.

Michonne almost hadn’t recognized him; he was so filthy.

Carl flew into her arms, knocking the breath out of her a second time. Gasping, Michonne held him tightly, pressing her face to his hair. She whispered his name once, twice, afraid he would disappear if she ever let him go. He was shaking. Or perhaps, she was.

“Are you all right?” Michonne demanded, pulling back to cup his face in her hands. It had only been a couple of months since she'd seen him last, but he’d grown, gaining a few inches over her. His dirty hair spilled over her hands. In the dark, it was impossible to tell if his face was bruised or just dirty. He wasn’t wearing his bandage; Michonne could only imagine how much muck had gotten into his eye. She shuddered. “*Where have you been?* ”

Tears spilling down his face, Carl nevertheless grinned at her. “You wouldn't believe me if I told you.”

“Uh, hi,” a voice said to their right, sheepishly. “Sorry I shot at you.”

Two teenagers came to stand beside them; dark-skinned, and dressed in torn, dirty clothes. They couldn’t have been older than eighteen. They looked similar enough that Michonne guessed they were related. The shorter boy with the floppy hair and the huge rifle in his hands smiled at her shyly.

“Cool hat,” the taller one said flippantly, leaning on his crowbar.

Michonne laughed lightly, wiping at the tear rolling down her cheek. “It’s not mine.” She took it off and placed it back on Carl’s head, where it belonged.

“A little less cool now,” the tall boy snickered.

“Screw you,” Carl said good-naturedly. He beamed at Michonne. “These are my friends,” he said, gesturing at the two boys. “Jake and Scott. Guys, this is Michonne.”

“The stepmom,” the shorter boy whispered to the other.

Carl shook his head, exasperated. “Come on,” he told Michonne, grabbing her hand. “We gotta hurry.”

He pulled her toward the cabin. Judith had stopped crying, but there was definitely movement inside. Carl didn’t seem the slightest bit afraid. No one had been keeping them hostage here, Michonne realized. They reached the door, but before Carl could pull it open, a blonde girl charged out, knife first.

“Woah!” Carl retreated, holding up his hands. “Claire - it’s us!”

“Damn it, Carl,” the blonde hissed, lowering her knife. “I almost poked your other eye out.” The girl, Claire, snapped her narrowed-eyed gaze to Michonne. “Who the hell are you?”

Michonne didn’t pay her any mind. Behind her, the cabin was dimly lit. A group of children sat around a single lantern, staring at her in disbelief. Enid and Mikey, the two other missing teenagers from Alexandria, and a small boy Michonne didn’t recognize. They looked like they’d been through hell, dirty and disheveled.

Michonne couldn’t see Judith anywhere. Heart in her throat, Michonne pushed past the blonde girl, entering the cabin. It was a mess of empty shelves and display racks. She spotted

Judith sitting by the counter, right next to a dead body. No, not a dead body, but a heavily injured man. He was unconscious, looking like he could turn at any moment, and yet Judith was sitting right next to him, unbothered.

For a moment, Michonne thought Judith didn't recognize her. She'd grown, too. Her blonde hair had gotten longer, tangled, and matted. She was filthy, and yet the most beautiful, wonderful things Michonne had ever seen. Judith's blue eyes blinked up at her, bewildered by her sudden appearance. Slowly, she raised her little hands, asking to be lifted.

Openly crying now, Michonne snatched Judith up into her arms. The girl made a tiny sound of protest; Michonne knew she was squeezing her too hard, but she couldn't help it. The weight of the past few weeks, months, came crashing down on her. She leaned back against the counter, afraid her legs would crumble under her.

"Hey," said Carl, coming up to them with a small, unsure smile. "Just so you know, Judith's totally potty-trained now," he said proudly.

Through her tears, Michonne laughed.

"Uh… excuse me, ma'am?" One of Carl's friends, the dark-skinned boy who'd apologized for shooting at her, interrupted them. "I'm sorry, but we really gotta go."

"The plan's working," said Enid, peeking out the cabin door. "They're totally going at each other." Outside, not far enough, the firefight was still in progress.

"What is it?" Michonne whispered above Judith's golden head. She glanced at the dying man at her feet and stepped back, pulling Carl away as well. "What's happening? Who's after you?"

The tall boy took a step forward. He'd picked up Michonne's sword and was holding it loosely in his hand. "Doesn't matter," he said, shaking his head. "We sicced the Saviors on them. Sooner or later one of 'em is gonna win. I don't wanna be here when that happens."

Michonne looked at Carl, who gave her a small nod. She had a million questions, but they would have to wait. Reluctantly, she passed Judith over to Carl, knowing she needed both of her hands free. All that shooting was going to draw walkers out of the woodwork, no doubt about it. Carl's friend handed her the sword back. Michonne took it, feeling its comforting weight in her hands.

"Okay," she said, gazing at the children. Her stomach churned. She didn't like being this close to the Saviors, even if their attention was elsewhere. "We move."

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They ran for what felt like hours, long after they could no longer hear any gunshots in the distance. Michonne led the way, her sword carving out walker after walker, protecting the tired children at her back.

The little boy whose name Michonne had yet to learn stumbled. He didn't make a sound, but he was struggling to keep pace. Meeting his startling bright eyes, Michonne snapped him up, noting how little he weighed. With little effort, Michonne positioned the little boy on her back, curling his legs around her waist.

"Can you hold on to me without falling?" Michonne asked. The little boy nodded his head against her back, tightening his arms around her shoulders.

The blonde-haired girl, Claire, gave her a look of approval. She ran with a limp, her arm slung over Enid's shoulders for support. Her pale skin glinted with a sheen of sweat.

"How're you holding up?" Enid asked, gasping a little, worry evident in her voice.

Claire replied, "Knee's feeling better, if you can believe it."

“Shit,” one of the boys (Scott or Jake, Michonne wasn’t sure), stumbled a little, nearly dropping his end of the stretcher. He and his brother (twin brothers, Michonne had learned) were carrying the dying man between them.

“Take a break,” Carl ordered, handing Judith over to Mikey. He took his friend's place on the stretcher. “I’ve got him.”

Michonne watched them somberly. On several occasions, she had opened her mouth, intent on asking the children to leave the dying man behind. The words kept dying on her tongue. It was obvious that, whoever he was, none of them were willing to abandon him.

"He'll turn soon," Michonne tried to say, heart aching for these children. "We need to-"

"No," Carl interrupted, breathing coming a little fast now. "You gotta trust me, Michonne. Please."

She sighed. The man would turn; it was only a matter of time. The bite on his face was a stark reminder of that. As soon as they reached shelter, they’d have to put him out of his misery. He was already unconscious, it would be a mercy. Michonne would help the children bury him, if need be. She only hoped he wouldn’t turn before they had a chance to say their goodbyes.

“Okay,” Michonne told Carl, who looked back at her with relief.

Two walkers came shuffling out of the woods, growling. The little boy's arms and legs tightened around her as she beheaded both creatures with a single hard swing of her sword.

"That's *so* cool," Claire breathed, looking at Michonne with starry eyes.

"Uh oh," she heard the tall boy say with a chuckle, "Claire's crushing on Carl's mom."

"*Dick*," Claire hissed back at him.

His response was to hum the chorus to *Stacy's Mom*. His brother barked out a laugh, but swallowed it quickly, masking it with a cough. He glanced at Michonne with embarrassment.

"Ignore it," Enid told her kindly, rolling her eyes a little. "They're always like that."

Michonne smiled at her. Their bickering was, in truth, coming as a bit of a relief. Whatever had happened to these children, they were not so traumatized that they couldn't joke with each other. Their camaraderie was real. Even when they teased each other, it was clearly without malice. It was heartening to see Carl so comfortable with friends his own age. He'd been so awkward with the teenagers in Alexandria, so serious and out of place.

It was clear these children trusted each other. What happened to them? Did somebody hurt them? Michonne intended to quiz Carl about everything. Later, in private. For now, she had to focus on leading them to safety.

Just when Michonne thought they were in the clear, headlights appeared behind them. *No*, she thought desperately, overtaken with terror. *No. They were so close.*

“Get off the road,” Michonne hissed, taking a sharp turn into a wide field.

Whatever hopes they had of getting away were dashed when the heavy, semi-trailer truck chased them into the field. It veered dangerously on its side as it swerved. The person behind the wheel clearly didn’t care that the truck was not suited for off-road pursuits. It gained on them quickly. Just as Michonne thought the truck would run them through, its huge wheels suddenly locked, bringing the truck to a wailing stop.

The tall teenager (Jake, Michonne thought) made a guttural sound in his throat. “*Fuck*,” he gasped out. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.”

Another vehicle overtook the truck, then another. The cars swerved around them, much more suitable for the rough terrain. There was nowhere left for Michonne and the children to go; they were blocked in, trapped between the blinding headlights.

A memory floated to the forefront of Michonne's mind. The night Glenn and Abraham had been murdered, Daryl taken away. Every nerve in her body was screaming at her to get away, but there was nowhere to go. The little boy she'd been carrying slid down to the ground. She took his hand in hers and squeezed, offering empty reassurances.

"It's all right," Michonne choked out, turning to meet Carl's gaze. His face was tight with anger. Michonne shook her head at him, silently asking him not to do anything brash. "It'll be okay," she promised, even though it was a lie.

The Saviors surrounded them, guns drawn. One of them, a familiar-looking woman with a tattoo on her neck, stomped over to Michonne. "You know the drill, dreadlocks," the woman sneered. "Kneel."

Closing her eyes briefly, Michonne obeyed. A few of the children hesitated, but the Saviors wasted no time pushing them down, forcing them to kneel in the dirt. Mikey managed to hand Judith back to Carl; the little girl clung to him, confused and frightened. They were searched, none too gently. The Saviors took away their weapons, making snide comments about their appearance.

"Don't touch me, you pervert," Claire groused as one of the saviors, a bald man in thick-rimmed glasses, searched her. He was shirtless, dressed in sweatpants and unlaced boots. A few of the Saviors looked like they'd been dragged out of bed, with sour moods to match.

The balding man huffed. He held up Claire's strange silver knife, inspecting it curiously. "Y'all crawled out of a swamp or something?"

"Yeah, asshole. You want a tour?" Claire snarked. The Savior responded by slapping her across the face, hard.

Michonne couldn't do anything for the girl except beg on her behalf, "Please," she choked out, pleading, "she didn't mean it."

The Savior smirked down at Claire. "Say you're sorry."

"Leave her alone," Carl demanded, voice filled with anger.

"Go to hell, goat fucker," Claire rasped back. She braced herself for another strike.

"Jeff." A voice rang out in warning, stopping the Savior with his fist halfway to Claire's face.

Michonne's heart dropped.

Negan strolled into their line of sight, looking like he had all the time in the world, swinging his cursed baseball bat lightly. He turned to Jeff, tsking. "Fuck off," he whispered to the Savior who proceeded to bow his head and make a hasty retreat. Negan rolled his eyes, loudly adding, "And Jeff? Pull up your goddamn pants. We can see your dick root, it's disgusting."

Jeff complied, stammering apologies.

Negan grimaced, rubbing his forehead. He dropped his hand with a sigh. He brightened up considerably as he turned his attention to the group. "Hi," he said, as affable as ever, "I'm-" he stopped, and his smile widened a fraction. "Aw, you know who I am."

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for my behavior. Feel free to yell at me about it in the comments (please! x)

# Big Damn Heroes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Claire's cheek stung. The Savior who'd slapped her scurried away the moment his boss appeared. Negan. It had to be him. He wasn't what she'd expected. He looked human enough, she thought, but she knew monsters came in all shapes and forms.

Negan walked with a pep in his step, almost like he was *happy* to be there, a one-man show in front of a (literally) captive audience. He did have a baseball bat, a nasty-looking thing covered in barbed wire. Scott had said he'd named it. Lucy, or Lily, or something stupid like that.

Claire glared, committing each one of the Saviors' features to memory. They took her weapons; her angel blade, because she'd been stupid enough to hold it in her hands, and the angel killing gun. They'd forced her down to her knees. It was *humiliating*.

Clenching her fists, Claire shook with the effort it took to keep her anger in check. Anger was easy. Certainly easier than being afraid. It was dumb, but what did she care? She was already dying. Maybe she'd come back as a vengeful ghost.

The air already stank with fear. Even Carl's badass stepmom, Michonne, had handed over her sword without resistance. And the twins, they were absolutely *terrified*. Jake was shaking like a leaf in the wind. Claire had never ever seen him so scared.

"*Holy* shit, if it isn't Tweedledee and Tweedlefuck," Negan said loudly, standing over Jake and Scott's bowed heads. "*Shit*, I thought you boys were dead."

To the twins' obvious relief, Negan continued his slow pacing, his sharp gaze roaming over the group. He gave each one of them a long, hard look, twirling the bat in his hand. He raised his eyebrows at Castiel's unconscious form and smirked lecherously at Michonne. Then he reached Carl and Judith, and a slow, liquidy smile spread across his face.

“Well, I’ll be fucked,” Negan said, sucking a sharp breath through his grinning teeth. “I didn’t know it was my birthday! Am I dreaming? Am I? Is this a dream? Someone better pinch my asscheeks because I *MUST* be dreaming."

Grinning broadly, Negan leaned forward and flicked his fingers, sending Carl’s hat tumbling off his head. “Carl, right? Rick Junior? Must be, 'cause your daddy, why, he used to eyeball me the *exact same way* ."

He paused, then started to chuckle. “Right, maybe NOT the exact same way, on account of his having *two* eyeballs, you know, but man, are you putting *that* one to work." He reached out, as if to poke Carl in his good eye, then snapped his hand back, as if he was only joking. "In all seriousness, kid, you look *disgusting*, and I mean that with the utmost respect. That eye is rad as hell. I do not want to mess with this face, no sir.”

“What do you want from us?” Carl asked in a calm, even voice.

Negan raised his eyebrows. "Why, I’m going to take you home, young man. Like a big, damn hero. Your daddy's been worried sick, you little twerp. Where the *fuck* have you been?"

Carl’s face was like marble. Only his arms, tightening around Judith, betrayed his nerves as he stared back at Negan coolly.

It seemed to tickle something in Negan. Whatever he saw in Carl's face, he liked it. "Look at this little badass," Negan intoned gleefully, scrunching his nose.

Then he turned his attention to Judith. "*Hi sweetheart*," Negan cooed, cloyingly sweet. "What in the world happened to you? Oh, you poor, sweet thing. Come here," he said, tucking the baseball bat under his armpit and holding out his hands for Judith.

Judith stared at the man with huge, round eyes. Time seemed to stand still. Carl didn’t move, and neither did Negan.

Claire's mind raced with possibilities, but no matter what, she couldn't think of a way to get out of this fucked up situation. *Please Cas*, she prayed silently, giving it everything she had, *please wake up*.

One of the Saviors, a woman with a tattoo on her neck, stepped forward. She prodded the back of Carl's head with her rifle.

Negan only smiled, gesturing with open arms. "Gimmie."

Shaking with anger, Carl passed Judith over to Negan. She whimpered softly in protest but melted easily enough into Negan's arms. She was such a sweet thing, Claire thought in despair, so trusting.

"Oh, look at this little angel," Negan cooed, rocking Judith in his arms. He patted her back, tucking her little head under his chin.

Stricken with terror, Michonne watched the grotesque display unfold. "Don't hurt her," she pleaded, her voice cracking.

Chuckling, Negan turned to Michonne. "You're one of Rick's people, aren't you?" Balancing Judith against his hip, Negan lifted his baseball bat, pointing it directly at Michonne's face. She flinched, hard. Negan smirked. "There's some *serious* Deja-Vu in the air tonight, right? It's not just me?"

"Please," Michonne said quietly.

"Jesus Christ," Negan said, shaking his head. He dropped the bat to his side. "Honestly, lady, don't get me started. I've been having the *worst* week."

Sighing, he began to rant. "First, and I don't know if y'all noticed or not, but maple syrup is *gone*. Poof. Not that fake orange corn shit. I'm talking about *real* tree-bleedin' Canadian oozy

goodness. Hand to God, I will give away my left testicle for a bottle of the good shit right now."

*God*, Claire thought. *This asshole really loves the sound of his own voice.* She glanced over at Carl, and their eyes met. He was thinking the same thing.

"Second thing," he continued, with the same aggravation he awarded the maple syrup situation, "some freaking banshee breaks all of my *goddamn* windows. I'm pretty sure my left ear's fucked now." He shook his head, grimacing.

"Finally, my best man, Simon? Goes AWOL. Do you know how important it is to have a second-in-command? How much work, time, and effort goes into this shit?" He looked at Judith, which seemed to soften him up. "Do you want to be my second in command, sweetie-pie? I bet you do."

He gave Judith a smacking kiss on the forehead. She stared back at him, baffled.

Negan chuckled lightly before turning his attention back to the group. "Tonight was supposed to be *Negan-time*. God knows I've earned it. There I was, minding my own business, sowing my wild oats, if you catch my drift," he paused to wink exaggeratedly at Michonne, "when some *jerkhole* brains two of my men. *Not cool*."

He strode purposefully toward Jake and Scott. "Dwight was one of my best men," Negan said somberly, quieter than before. His expression was stone. "He knew *his* place."

Shaking, frightened tears streaming down his face, Jake nodded.

"Leave him alone," Michonne spoke up. She tried to stand, but one of the Saviors shoved her back down, hard. Undeterred, she pleaded with Negan, "*Please*, they're just kids."

Negan gave her a hard look. "Children need to learn."

Frightened, Michonne hurriedly nodded. “We understand.”

He approached Michonne slowly. His gaze then shifted to Oliver, nestled beside her. “Who’s this tough little man?” Negan asked, eyes crinkling.

Oliver stared back at him. Negan leaned forward as if divulging a secret. “Tell you what, kiddo. How would you and this cutie here-“ he bounced Judith lightly- “like to go on a ride to try some real, honest-to-God, good old-fashioned ice cream? Mmm?”

The little boy blinked. Quietly, he asked, "What's ice cream?"

Negan gasped theatrically. He leaned back, hand on his chest as if someone had stabbed him through the heart. “*What’s ice cream*?” he repeated, scandalized. “That is just… *tragic*.”

“Where are you taking them?” Michonne demanded, trying to stand up again. The same Savior shoved her back down.

“Really, it’s just ice cream.” Negan scanned the group, then seemed to settle on Enid. “You, kid, get up. Come on, get up. We haven't got all day. Trust me, I'm doing you a huge solid here."

Confused and frightened, Enid climbed to her feet. Judith practically leaped into Enid's arms. Negan motioned for Oliver to go with her as well. Then he snapped his fingers at a weasley-looking Savior, motioning him forward. “Take these three out for some of Nonna Dia’s Special.” He grinned.

The Savior nodded. He clamped a heavy hand on Enid’s neck, causing her to gasp in fright.

“Hey - “ Negan stuck the bat under the man's chin. “Does she look eighteen to you? Keep your fucking hands to yourself.”

The weasley man dropped his hand like it was on fire. “Yes, sir.”

They drove off without much fanfare. Enid met Claire’s eye as she left; she was terrified. Claire fought hard to keep herself from screaming. Negan was speaking, but Claire wasn’t paying him any attention. She was praying, a single mantra, over and over again. *Cas, please wake up*.

The bat snapped by Claire’s face. “Excuse the fuck out of me.”

Claire steadied her gaze and glared, mustering all of her teenage nerve. “You’re excused.”

Instead of hitting her with his bat, Negan chuckled. “Is this your daddy, mean girl?”

Belatedly, Claire realized she’d been clutching Castiel’s limp hand in hers. She shivered, unable to respond. Smirking, Negan lowered the baseball bat to Castiel’s face, the barbs scratching his pallid skin. Angel or not, right now, he was just as vulnerable as they were.

“Don’t,” Claire whispered, gripping Castiel’s hand tightly, watching in horror as Negan turned Castiel’s face, revealing the hideous bite on his face. Mortifyingly, she began to cry, tears streaming down her face in streaks.

“Oh, kid,” Negan said quietly, not without sympathy. “It’s how it goes, isn’t it?”

Eyes brimming with tears, Claire whispered softly, “Please, don’t hurt him.”

Negan stared down at her, long and hard. Slowly, the bat lifted away from Castiel’s motionless face. “Shit,” he sighed, taking a step back. “I’m turning into a right softie, aren’t I?” He brought the baseball bat to his own face, closing his eyes, seemingly gathering strength.

“We lost a few good men tonight,” Negan continued, dropping the bat at his side. His moods seemed to change as fast as quicksilver. “I *know* you dingdongs set me up after those assholes. That trail of bodies? *Chef’s kiss*.” He kissed his fingers with a smack. “It breaks my heart to have to kill one of you. Really, it does.”

A frost that had nothing to do with her impending sickness washed over Claire. She squeezed Castiel’s hand. *Please, Cas. Wake up!*

Negan scrubbed his face with his hand. “A life for the lives lost. Those are the rules. No exceptions.” He dropped his hand with a sigh. “For Dwight, for Terrence, for…” he paused, then clicked his fingers at the Saviors standing guard. “What was his name? The guy with the ear?”

“Tony, sir,” replied a bearded Savior.

“Right, Tony. Loved that guy.” Negan nodded.

“And Fat Joey.”

“Yep,” Negan said, rubbing his beard with a grimace. “I loved that fat fucker too. Yes, he had bigger tittes than most of my wives, and *yes*, he was really fucking useless, but you know what? He was *loyal*, and somebody shot him down like a *dog*. Things will not be the same now he’s dead, because you know what - without Fat Joey? Skinny Joey is just…pfff… *Joey*. And that, my friends, is a goddamn tragedy.”

There was a murmur of agreement from the Saviors. Slowly, Negan approached Scott. He knelt down, keeping his voice low and honeyed when he asked, “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you, son?”

Trembling, Scott shook his head.

Negan pulled back, a smile on his face. “Or maybe it was one of these assholes -” he gestured, rather dramatically, in the direction of the semi-truck.

A moment passed. Nothing happened. Negan dropped his hand with a long-suffering sigh. “That was your cue,” he said dryly.

The two Saviors standing by the truck’s back doors flinched, then scrambled to get the doors opened. They pulled out several roughed-up, bound and gagged men. Claire was startled to recognize Victor among the captives. He noticed her, eyes widening, and tried to yell something through his gag. He fell silent when a Savior punched him in the gut.

Like Claire and her friends, the Hunters were forced down to their knees. Some of them were bleeding quite badly.

Negan watched them calmly. “You know what, I don’t mind doing other people’s dirty work every now and then,” he said, striding toward the prisoners, bat slung over his shoulder. “There I was, chasing after these douchebags, when - *holy shit*!”

Negan stopped dead, staring at one of the Hunters. “*Bob*?”

The hunter blinked up at Negan. "Uhn?" he said through the gag, eyes bulging.

Laughing heartily, Negan tucked the bat under his armpit. He leaned down, pulling the big man by his shoulders, lifting him up effortlessly. “How the hell are you?” Negan asked the gagged man, grinning from ear to ear. “What’s it been? Twenty years? Jesus fuck, you look like *shit*.”

He threw his arm around Bob’s shoulder, not bothering to remove his gag or bindings. “Look everybody - *it’s Bob*. Did I ever tell you about my old buddy, Bob? Remind me to tell y’all about the time with the *clowns*. Remember, Bob? One of those cases that just hit you straight in the what-the-fuck. I thought my boy was going to *shit his pants*. Fucking Corky the magic clown.” He laughed.

Bob kept staring at Negan, nose bleeding freely down into his gag. Negan patted him on the shoulder, all friendly-like. He turned back to the group, still chuckling.

"Fuck, where was I? I keep getting distracted." He ran a hand through his hair. "Ah, yes, I think I was just about to break someone's balls -" he pointed the bat at Claire, making her jump. "Figuratively speaking..." Smirking, he turned back to Bob and stuck the baseball bat between the hunter's legs. "...literally speaking."

The large man stood on his tiptoes. He squealed behind his gag.

Negan burst into laughter. He lowered the bat. "I'm just fucking with you, B. I don't want to break your balls!"

He waited until Bob gave a nervous laugh.

Then, without any warning, Negan swung the bat at the hunter's face.

No one moved, too shocked to react. The hunter, knocked off his feet, stared up at Negan in abject terror. His jaw was hanging loosely off his face.

Negan, grinning, brought the bat down hard, striking the hunter again and again. Blood, bone, and brain matter splattered freely throughout Negan's brutal attack. He didn't stop until the hunter's face was reduced to a bloody paste.

Claire fought to control her breathing, watching the display with sickening fascination. *Please, Cas. Please wake up*.

Finally, breathing hard, Negan whipped back. His face was splattered with blood. "*Shit* … I just remembered," he said, staring down at his handiwork. "Son of a *BITCH* still owes me eighty bucks!"

He turned to the bound and gagged Hunters. They were staring back at him with fear and dismay. Negan gave them a little wave. "Take these assholes back to Sanctuary. Give 'em a nice timeout on Easy Street."

The tattooed female Savior brought over a towel. Negan handed her the bat for safekeeping, then wiped the blood and sweat off his face. "Don't worry," he called after the Hunters as they were loaded back into the truck, "I'll come and visit."

With a sigh, Negan turned his attention back to Claire and her friends. “It’s nothing personal,” he explained, wiping his hands on the towel. “I’m assuming there’s a reason these assholes came after you. It’s all right, you’re safe now.” He smiled, almost fatherly, flinging the towel over his shoulder. The smile slowly dropped from his face. He stared at the twins, expression hard. “As long as you follow the rules.”

He strode slowly toward Jake and Scott. “I expected more from you two,” he said sternly, stepping between them.

Shaking like a prey animal, Jake whispered. “We didn’t run.”

Negan gripped Jake’s shoulder. “I know, son.”

Then he pulled out a knife and slit Jake’s throat.

There was a scream. Hers, everyone’s. Claire didn’t know. She didn’t know what sounds were coming out of her own mouth. She couldn’t hear anything beyond the ringing in her ears.

*Please, Cas.* She begged. *Please, please.*

She watched Jake collapse, gasping, clawing at the gaping wound in his neck.

Scott’s hands flew to his brother’s throat, helplessly trying to hold back the rivers of blood. “No, no, no…”

The bleeding slowed down to a trickle. There was a gurgle, one last dying breath. The body went still.

Sobbing, Scott cradled Jake’s lifeless body in his arms.

Castiel never woke up.

Negan sighed. He stepped toward Scott. “I know you think I’m a monster. It’s okay,” Negan said, squeezing Scott’s quivering shoulder. “No one is above the rules, not even me. The rules keep us alive, keep us *in order*.”

In Scott's arms, Jake's body began to twitch.

Negan dropped his hand. "Shit," he exclaimed, stepping back. "That must be some kind of record!”

The walker wearing Jake's face snapped its teeth, its eyes clouded and wild. It struggled against Scott’s hold. Sobbing harder than ever before, Scott pushed down with all his strength, keeping the walker's gnashing teeth at bay.

"That was fast as *shit*," Negan said, sounding impressed. "*Teenagers*," he chortled, shaking his head.

A Savior approached Scott. It dropped something in front of him. Scott flinched hard, struggling to hold down Jake’s undead body. It was a pole of some kind, Claire realized with a shudder of disbelief. It had some kind of holding mechanism at its end. Suddenly, she remembered what Jake had told them, back at the camp. About Negan stringing up traitors for all to see.

No one was coming to save them, she realized.

Not Castiel, not Carl's mythical dad.

No one.

"We're done here," said Negan, rolling his neck with a sigh. "Let's get you kids home."

Chapter End Notes

Trust me? 💔

P.S. Check the series tag later today. I have a surprise for you.

# Welcome to Alexandria

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Claire's throat hurt. Crying only made it worse; every swallow was like pushing a baseball down her gullet. Yet, she welcomed it. As odd as it was, the pain served as a welcome distraction. Claire concentrated on the physical sensation, allowing it to sweep over her. It helped put a distance between herself and the *other*, more visceral source of pain, or else it would consume her.

The van hit another pothole, throwing Claire and the other unwilling occupants off balance. She gritted her teeth, willing her stomach to settle. She'd never been prone to carsickness, or any other kind of sickness for that matter. It was an unsettling feeling, to say the least.

They'd been stuck in there for hours, cramped inside the back of a moving, windowless van. It was a lot like the one they'd driven out of Jersey before everything took a turn for the worse. Unlike before, the man in the front seat wasn't their friend. He was certainly no angel. He was a bully and a murderer, and if it wasn't for the metal sheet between them and the fact that he had Judith and Oliver sitting in his lap, Claire might've picked up Michonne's sword and stabbed him in the back.

They hit another bump in the road. Claire pressed a hand to her mouth. She couldn't help the gagging sound that escaped her.

A hateful voice called out from the front. "If you're gonna hurl, make sure you swallow that shit *down*."

"Asshole," Claire rasped bitterly, not caring if he heard her.

"Try breathing through your nose," Enid suggested softly. Her voice was thicker than usual. She'd been crying.

Her friend's suggestion didn't help much with Claire's nausea, but she kept at it anyway. How long before they'd reach Alexandria? It was difficult to gauge the passage of time, sitting around in the dark. Claire wondered if it was still night outside, and if Scott and Jake actually made it to Sanctuary.

No, not Jake. The walker.

"It should've been me," Mikey whispered, so low Claire barely heard him.

"*Knock it off*," she shot back, a little harsher than intended.

"You know it's true," Mikey said, the pain in his voice amplified by the darkness. "I've been nothing but dead weight, all this time. He was stronger, braver-"

"Stop it," Enid interrupted, breath hitching. "Don't say things like that."

Claire knocked her head back against the van's wall. She was acutely aware of the Saviors sitting in the front, listening to their every word. This was private. This was painful. They didn't deserve to hear it.

"*You're wrong*," Claire finally said, fighting to keep her voice even. "You idiot," she added for good measure.

"He deserved better," Mikey added miserably.

She swallowed, focusing on the dull ache in her throat. "Yeah, he did."

It had been the worst kind of torture, watching it happen. The Saviors had taken the twins away. Not by car, np. They'd forced Scott to clamp a restraint around Jake's neck. Jake's body. His mindless, snarling, feral body.

Scott hadn't even looked at them. Not even once. He'd needed every bit of strength to lead Jake, the walker, away. Back to Sanctuary, where they hung traitors for all to see.

"He was scared," Carl said in a hollow voice. His words, although quiet, seemed to reverberate in the darkness. "He was *so fucking scared* and I convinced him to come with us anyway."

"That's not on you," Enid whispered. She hadn't seen it happen, but she'd passed the horrid march on her way back from Sanctuary. She'd seen Scott lead Jake's undead body away with that horrible pole, heard the Saviors' taunts and mocking laughter.

"I told him we'd protect him." Carl's voice was laden with bitter resentment and self-loathing.

Although she couldn't see anything beyond faint silhouettes, Claire's eyes squeezed shut. Bile rose in her throat. She choked it down. It wasn't fair. None of it. *It wasn't fair.*

"Don't do this to yourself, Carl," Michonne said softly. She'd been so quiet, Claire had almost forgotten she was there. "This kind of thinking… it will eat you alive."

Hesitantly, afraid to hear the answer, Enid asked, "What happened while we were gone?"

"Who else?" Carl demanded. It didn't take a psychic to figure out what he meant. Who else had been murdered?

Michonne hesitated. Claire had only known her for a few hours, but she didn't strike her as someone who minced words. "Denise, Abraham, Glenn." Each name was uttered with a heavy weight of grief. "They took Daryl. We've been - "

“Dad’s been working with them,” Carl stated, his words laced with anger. “They said they were looking for me. What the hell, Michonne?”

Michonne leaned forward so sharply that her hair grazed Claire’s face. “That’s not true.” Her tone was low, and fiercely protective. “Your father’s been working himself to the ground, keeping  them from hurting anyone else.”

“Why didn’t you fight?” Carl demanded, his voice almost breaking. “Why didn’t you kill them already? Dad could’ve - “

“Carl!” said Michonne sharply, cutting him off. “We’ll talk *later* .”

It was the right call, of course. They were *not* alone. Behind the thin metal sheet separating them, Negan began to whistle. A cheerful tune, an uncomfortable reminder of his presence. Carl wasn’t stupid. He got the hint and snapped his mouth shut, his anger permeating the air like poison.

The small light affixed to the van’s roof blinked and flickered. For a moment or two, Claire was able to see her friends’ stricken faces. Enid was crying silently into her sleeve, knees tucked into her chest. Carl was staring into nothing, mouth set in a thin line. Then the light faded again, casting them back into darkness.

For a moment, Claire thought she’d felt *something*. But no. It was only the van’s shitty wiring, it had nothing to do with Castiel and his flaring grace. Claire took his cool, limp hand into hers and squeezed. A part of her was still waiting for a miracle.

The Saviors had almost left Castiel behind. It had taken some hysterics on Claire’s part to convince Negan otherwise. They’d dumped Castiel into the back of the van, leaving the stretcher behind. Carelessly, hastily, like tossing away last week’s leaky garbage bag. They’d thrown in Michonne’s sword as well, taunting them, saying how they’d better use it fast.

Joke’s on them. Castiel wasn’t turning anytime soon. Although, in his weakened state, she wasn’t quite sure how vulnerable he really was. His wounds weren’t healing but they weren’t

worsening, either. Anyone else would've died from the blood loss alone, never mind the walkers using him like a chew toy.

The light flickered again. Michonne was watching Claire, looking tense and concerned. No doubt, she was waiting for Castiel to surge awake in the tight confines of the van.

"He's not dead." Trying to reassure her, Claire reached for Michonne's hand. She pressed her fingers to Castiel's pulse point, knowing it would be slow and steady.

Claire felt rather than heard Michonne's quiet sigh. "I've never seen anyone this bad last this long," Michonne admitted, drawing back. "Is he your father?" she asked.

A joyless laugh bubbled in Claire's chest. "It's complicated."

A hush fell over them as the van slowed down to a crawl. Have they reached Alexandria? Claire sat up straight, ears perked. She thought she could hear a brief exchange outside. Something was moving. A gate? She thought so.

They inched forward slowly, then reversed, getting into position. The Saviors were welcome in Alexandria, it seemed. Dread filled her gut. She'd pictured this moment before, but never quite like this.

"You're early," a man said, tired with a hint of underlying anger. "We weren't expecting you back so soon."

"Rick!" Negan called out cheerfully, as though he was greeting an old friend. The van dipped and shuddered when he climbed out. "You're never going to *believe* what I found."

Even through the metal, Claire could clearly hear the sharp intake of breath, the shuddering sob. Negan was still talking, of course, spewing a hundred words a minute. It was impossible to tell what the man, Rick, was saying.

Rick Grimes, that was Carl's dad, wasn't it? He was crying, that much Claire could tell.

"Don't hold back on my account," said Negan sarcastically, voice oozing with pleasure.

No one opened the door for them. Negan was biding his time, putting on his little performance. From the sound of it, he was having the time of his life. Claire could feel the anger radiating off of Carl in waves.

It was easy to picture Negan's shark grin. "I've been thinking, Rick. Isn't it time I give something back to the community? Show how much I appreciate all the work you've done for me? Well, here I am. Father fucking Chrismas. Saint Nicky in the flesh. And that's not everything." He paused for dramatic effect. "Carl, get the fuck out here."

The van doors flew open. Claire blinked, pupils adjusting to the light. A small crowd was waiting for them. Most of them were Saviors, grim-faced, cruel. Enjoying the show.

Claire guessed that the man holding Judith like a precious treasure was Rick Grimes. Far from the formidable, ruthless figure her friends had painted, Rick stood like someone close to collapsing. Like someone who was fighting a losing war with gravity. His pale, bloodshot eyes widened when he saw his son.

"Carl," Rick whispered hoarsely.

It was not the happy reunion Claire had pictured. A moment passed. Neither of them moved.

Losing patience, Negan rolled his eyes and scoffed. "Will you get out here, kid? Give your dad a hug before he keels over? Jesus."

"This is a joke," Carl muttered, leaving the van with his head hanging low and fists clutched at his sides.

Stiffly, he walked toward his wide-eyed father. Then Rick made an indescribable sound. He pulled Carl to him, squeezing him and Judith both, face tucked into his son's shoulder. He didn't seem to care the slightest bit about their audience.

Negan began to clap. The Saviors, taking his cue, followed suit. They jeered, cheered, and hooted. A few of them whistled. It was ridiculous, Claire thought in anger. It was obscene.

In sharp contrast to his father, Carl was as stiff as a board. He wasn't crying. He was fuming.

Slowly, one by one, Michonne and the others climbed out as well. Claire peered outside, reluctant to leave Castiel alone inside the van. Alexandria was everything Claire had pictured in her mind. A suburban paradise for even the most hardened survivor. No one looked happy, though. Relieved, maybe, but not happy.

A short, broad-shouldered man caught Mikey in a bear hug. His father, no doubt. A stout woman in glasses was trying to speak to Enid, even though the ghost-faced Enid ignored her completely.

"This is so messed up," Claire sighed to herself. She turned around, debating on how to get Castiel out of the van.

A Savior appeared at the doors, a muscle-bound giant with an ugly sneer. He grabbed Claire by the arm. "What are you waiting for?" he grunted. "Get the fuck out."

Caught off guard, Claire might've fallen flat on her face if Michonne hadn't caught her. "Thanks," Claire mumbled.

Michonne inched closer. She gave Claire a hard stare. "You're burning up," she stated, brow furrowed.

Claire glared. “I’m fine.” Then she spotted the same Savior reaching into the van. He pulled Castiel out by his ankles, yanking him out with a grunt of effort. “No! Stop!” Claire cried out.

As if in slow motion, Castiel’s unconscious tumbled to the ground, crumpled and undignified. The bandages on his chest shifted, revealing the hideous staples holding his flesh together. They’d done the best they could, back in that ruined town.

“Jesus,” the huge Savior mocked, using his boot to turn Castiel fully onto his back. “Check out Frankenstein’s monster over here.”

Claire screamed. She flung herself over Castiel, covering him with her own body as best as she could. Shielding him from the Saviors and the crowd’s curious stares alike. “Don’t touch him!”

The Savior smirked, but before he could do anything, Carl shook his father off and rushed to stand between her and the Savior. “Leave them alone,” Carl said darkly, giving the man a hard shove.

The Savior was a big man; he didn’t even stumble. “Why?” he sneered, puffing his considerable chest. "He's dead meat anyway."

"*You'll* be dead meat soon enough," Carl promised, unflinching.

Before things could escalate, Negan sauntered between the two, clicking his tongue. “Carl,” he intoned smoothly, throwing his arm around Carl’s tense shoulder, “were you just threatening one of my guys?”

Claire lifted her head slightly. She didn’t let go of Castiel, but she shot a pleading look at Carl. It was a power play, she knew, and Carl was dead if he didn’t play it right.

Rick tried to intervene. “He didn’t mean to.” He’d handed Judith over to one of the townspeople, and was subtly trying to angle his body so that Negan would move away from Carl. “He doesn’t understand yet.”

Negan wasn’t having it. “Excuse me, Rick. I’m talking to the boy with the giant set of huevos.”

“...Sorry,” Carl offered reluctantly, sounding anything but.

Negan's sharp gaze flitted between father and son. He thumped Carl on the shoulder. “I love this kid,” he told Rick, smiling brightly.

Then he let out a shrill whistle. “Pack it up, boys!” he called, signaling his Saviors to move out. He angled his head toward Rick, adding, “They’ll be back in three days to collect.”

Rick inhaled sharply. “We need more time - “

“Rick,” Negan said, tone dropping low in warning. “Do you have any idea how ungrateful you sound right now?”

Lips drawn in a thin line, Rick didn’t answer. For a moment, Claire thought he was going to lash out. The moment passed.

“I’m sorry,” Rick managed to bite out.

That didn’t seem to satisfy Negan in the slightest. He inclined his head toward one of the Saviors. “Why don’t you ask my man here how much he’d *love* to be in your position right now?” It seemed like a rhetorical question, because immediately, Negan asked, “Gary, do you have children?”

The Savior, Gary, pulled a locket from under his shirt's collar. "I lost my little girl, boss. She's buried with her mother. God rest their souls." He kissed the locket before slipping it back under his collar.

Still staring at Rick, face hard, Negan prompted another Savior, "Regina?"

"Three boys," Regina replied harshly. She stared at Rick with a look of contempt.

Negan nodded slowly. "Do you have *any idea* how lucky you are? How many would *kill* to be where you are right now?" He took a step closer, putting his face an inch away from Rick's. "In fact, I don't think I even heard a goddamn thank you from you, did I?"

Rick looked away first. "Thank you," he whispered.

Still so close he could kiss Ruck if he wanted to, a slow smile spread across Negan's mouth. "Actually, I think we'll be back in *two days*."

With a promise of a speedy return, the Saviors left the way they came. Claire waited until the gate rolled shut behind them, until she could no longer hear their engines rumbling. Rick was waiting too. He stood at the closed gate, pinching the bridge of his nose. It wasn't until Michonne sidled up to him that his shoulders lost their tension. Sighing deeply, Rick melted into Michonne's touch.

"Thank you," Rick breathed into Michonne's hair. This time, he actually sounded like he meant it.

Claire jumped when a hand touched her shoulder. It was Enid, pale and exhausted, but somehow able to grace Claire with a small smile. "We have an infirmary. He'll be more comfortable there."

"We've got him," Carl said, gently nudging Claire away from Castiel.

Was she shaking? It was hard to tell. Being sick sucked, Claire decided.

Knowing her waning strength would be of no help, Claire stepped back, leaving room for Carl, Enid, and Mikey to try and lift Castiel. She was disheartened to see them fail miserably. Castiel was much heavier than he looked. Without the stretcher, lifting his dead weight was a struggle for the exhausted teenagers. They had to lower him back to the ground not a moment later.

Carl was huffing, hat drooped low over his forehead. “We should get a gurney or something,” he muttered. He flinched when his father placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Son,” Rick said gently, “let me help you.”

Without him needing to say a word, a few townspeople stepped forward to help. Although obviously wary that Castiel could turn at any given moment, they followed Rick’s lead. Or tried to, at least. Rick waved most of them off, then nodded at a black man in a priest’s tab collar. The priest picked Castiel up by the legs, steering Rick and himself backward, deeper into Alexandria.

Claire met Carl's eye. They shared a tiny, secret grin. If that guy was a real priest, Claire thought, he was going to lose his mind if he ever found out he’d carried a bona fide angel of the Lord like a sack of potatoes.

“Claire,” Oliver piped up, appearing next to her. Claire nearly jumped out of her skin. Sometimes the little boy could be so quiet, she’d forget he was even there. Oliver looked at her with big, bright eyes. He seemed quite unbothered by everything that had just taken place.

“You okay?” Claire asked with a sigh.

“Do we live here now?” Oliver asked, tilting his head curiously.

“I don’t know,” Claire admitted. “Why don’t you go have a look around? See if you like it?”

He nodded. Claire watched him go. At least behind the walls, she didn’t have to keep such a close eye on him. Not any more than a normal kid his age. She wondered if he’d be sad, after she was gone. Sometimes it seemed like nothing could affect him.

Every moment that passed, Claire felt closer to death. Maybe Castiel would wake up in time to save her. Maybe not. It was a disconcerting feeling, not knowing where she stood. Not too long ago, she had a plan. She never meant to stick around. Castiel had to find his Dean, after all, and Claire thought she was supposed to help him.

Sighing, Claire began to limp after the group. The ache in her knee flared. Cursing, Claire flailed in a clumsy attempt to keep her balance. She would’ve failed, but once again, Michonne was there to catch her.

“Were you bitten too?” Michonne asked plainly, keeping her voice low.

Biting her lip, Claire nodded.

Michonne’s sharp gaze softened. “I’m sorry.”

Claire pulled her arm back. “Why? *You* didn’t bite me.”

Michonne didn’t seem to think that it was all that funny. She leveled Claire with a stare, tilting her head. “For what it’s worth, Claire - thank you.”

“For what?” Claire wondered with a frown, caught off guard.

Michonne gave her a soft smile. “For bringing Carl and Judith home,” she said earnestly. “For being there.”

Claire snorted. “Didn’t you hear?” she asked bitterly. “*Negan* brought them home.”

Michonne’s lips curved in a wry smile. She had a sense of humor, at least.

“He’s also Santa Claus,” Michonne said sarcastically. She took Claire by the elbow. “Come on, infirmary's not far.”

Chapter End Notes

I owe you an apology for the last chapter. I wonder how many of you noticed that I've been hinting at Jake's death for quite some time. Is it truly over for him? We'll have to wait and see.
Our story is nearly at its end, but a new one will soon begin. Keep watching the series tag, because we're about to embark on a new adventure.

# Do Not Go Gentle

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Throughout the day, Claire's condition worsened. Her fever spiked, her skin turned pale and clammy. She remained lucid, at least. So many others spent their last hours in a state of delirium, ranting and raving as their bodies slowly succumbed to the infection. Instead, Claire got to die slowly, in pain, and with all of her mental faculties intact. Lucky her.

Wanting to avoid the curious glances of the town's residents, Claire had sought refuge in Alexandria's infirmary. She'd hoped for a bed, but there weren't any left. Apparently, the Saviors had taken an issue with the town's supply of mattresses. So instead, Claire had found a corner and curled up in it, waiting for the end to take her.

Claire imagined what she'd look like as a walker. She could picture it clearly now. How everyone would stare in horror as some creature, some violent *thing*, opened her eyes and moved her body like it was its own. A laugh bubbled in Claire's chest. It wouldn't exactly be a first.

"What's so funny?" Enid wondered. She knelt down in front of Claire and gently dabbed at her forehead with a wet cloth.

Before she could reply, Claire's dry chuckle turned into a harsh cough. Gasping, feeling like her lungs were climbing up her throat, Claire tried not to panic as her body shuddered with each labored breath. *I'm okay*, she mouthed when it was finally over, slumping sideways as a bout of dizziness hit her.

"Easy," Enid murmured, catching her before she could slip any further. She helped Claire lean back against the wall. Only when she was satisfied did Enid raise a hand to wipe the spit off her own cheek.

Claire looked at her friend through wet lashes. "Sorry," she mumbled.

“Don’t worry about it.” Enid shrugged. She picked up the wet cloth again. “You okay?”

Claire’s eyes fluttered shut at the press of the cool fabric against her feverish skin. “You ever pictured what you’d look like as a… y’know.” Her voice was so raspy, she hardly recognized it. She raised her hand in a claw-like gesture and growled weakly, adding, “One of them.”

“Sometimes,” Enid admitted, pausing. Finding Claire’s hand, she gave it a squeeze. “You won’t turn, Claire. I promise.”

“Don’t put me down,” Claire said quietly, staring at their joint hands. “Not you. I don’t want it to be the last memory you have of me.”

“Hey.” She squeezed Claire’s hand so hard her knuckles cracked. “This isn’t over yet. There’s still time.”

Letting out a sigh, Claire closed her eyes. How to tell Enid she’d already lost hope? She’d lost it the moment Negan had slit Jake’s throat. Castiel hadn’t heard her prayers then. He wasn’t hearing them now.

It was a fool’s hope. She knew that now. There was something wrong with Castiel. Profoundly wrong. His wounds weren’t getting better - not the gunshot hole in his shoulder, not where the dead had ripped into him. And that was only his physical form. That wasn’t really him, not really. His real injuries, Claire suspected, were beyond their comprehension.

The light fixture on the ceiling buzzed noisily. Claire opened her eyes and tilted her face, staring at the flickering light, feeling oddly detached. She was beginning to suspect it had nothing to do with the wiring after all. *Are you dying too, Cas?*

At least he was there with her in presence, if not in spirit. She could reach up and hold his limp hand if she wanted to. The well-meaning townspeople had carried him to the infirmary, dropping him onto a gurney right before Carl had shooed them all away. They hadn't asked a lot of questions. Obviously, none of them thought Castiel would last the night.

Claire didn’t think she’d last the night, either. Already, she could feel her strength waning. Her options were limited at best - wait for the sickness to run its course, or tap out on her own terms. Neither option seemed especially appealing. If only she had a gun! The damned Saviors had stolen all of theirs, even the angel-killing one.

Eating a bullet would’ve been a kinder death. Easier than using the knife Michonne had pressed into her hands. At least she’d been kind enough to ask Claire what *she* wanted, respecting her privacy and her wish to be left alone. Mostly alone. Claire didn't think her friends would stay away for long.

“Don’t do that," Enid sighed.

“What?”

“Don't get lost in your own head.” Enid ran her hand through her dirty hair, fingers snagging on the tangled. “I’m right here with you, alright?”

Claire frowned at her friend. It’d been half a day since they’d arrived, but Enid hadn’t left Claire’s side long enough to enjoy Alexandria’s running water, which really was a damn tragedy. “You could use a shower,” Claire merely said in response, crinkling her nose.

Enid snorted. “So could you.” She tilted her head, expression softening. “Want me to run you a bath?”

Claire shook her head. It was a regretful decision. “I can't." She groaned, vision swimming. The buzzing from the light bulb hanging over their heads was suddenly unbearable. “Ugh. Turn it off.”

Enid jumped to her feet, rushing for the light switch. “It’s not working,” she said, puzzled, flicking the switch on and off to no avail. Suddenly, the light went out with a loud crack. "Oh," said Enid, dropping her hand. "I think the power went out."

Claire slowly lifted her head. "Oh no. How will you live?"

“I have a really good sense of smell,” Enid joked back.

Claire's smile faltered. "This is a real craptastic homecoming, huh?"

Enid shrugged. "It doesn't feel like coming home," she admitted, shuffling her feet. "I mean, it's not like anyone's been hanging around waiting for me."

"I'm sorry about Glenn," Claire said softly. She knew how much Enid was looking forward to seeing him again.

"Yeah," Enid replied, hanging her head. "I heard Maggie's at the Hilltop. That's good. They have a doctor there. She's pregnant, you know." There was a shiver in Enid's voice. Grief. For Glenn, for Jake. Both murdered by Negan. And soon, Enid would have to grieve for Claire, too.

"You should go there," Claire suggested with a hollow smile. "I'm sure Maggie will be happy to see you."

Enid gave her a frown. “I’m not going anywhere.”

"I won't be here long," Claire reminded her gently.

Sighing, Enid joined Claire on the floor. She shifted until they were sitting shoulder to shoulder, backs pressed to the pearly white wall. “Hey,” she said, “Do you remember when I found you on the ship? Right after we crawled out of Heaven?”

Claire tilted her head. “Yes?”

“It was right after that guy slapped you around. Remember?”

Claire scoffed. “That *God*, you mean? Sure, I remember. *Son of a bitch* gave me a bald spot.” She brought a trembling hand to her hairline, fingers fluttering over a thin line of scar tissue.

Enid gave a small hum. "I never told you, but you were kind of freaking me out. I thought I was gonna have to stitch you up or something. You looked like *shit* .” She laughed lightly. “Only, you stopped bleeding pretty quickly. Do you remember?"

Whatever point Enid was trying to make, Claire was too exhausted to think it over. "It looked worse than it was."

"Always is when it comes to you.” Enid tilted her head, gracing Claire with a thoughtful side-eyed expression. “How’s your knee?”

Eyebrows knitted, Claire flexed her leg in test. Every muscle in her body carried a dull ache, but the flaring pain in her knee was all but gone. “Okay, I guess,” Claire said. “I get to die knowing my undead corpse won’t be a limper. Sweet.”

Enid shook her head. “You’re so much stronger than you think, Claire. I’m serious. You can’t give up now. Not yet.”

Claire sighed. With some effort, she shifted down until she could lay her head on Enid's shoulder. "Whatever happens," she murmured, “I’m glad you’re here with me.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Enid repeated.

They stayed like that for some time. Claire dozed on and off. Minutes or hours, she couldn't quite tell. "Hey," Claire mumbled against Enid's shoulder, "Promise me something?"

Enid inhaled sharply. “ *No* .”

Frowning, Claire dragged her head back up. “Why not?”

Enid glared. “You want me to make you a deathbed promise, that’s why. Fuck you, Claire. No.”

Pouting, Claire asked, “You’re not even gonna hear me out?”

“Nope.”

"I kind of want to punch you," Claire pointed out mildly.

Enid shrugged. "If it’ll make you feel better."

They both tensed when they heard the infirmary’s front door open and close. Then they realized it was only Mikey, who had a particular way of dragging his feet whenever he wasn’t paying attention.

“I’m back,” he said needlessly, showing up at the door in clean clothes and carrying an ornate silver tray. It was the kind that wouldn’t have looked out of place in an antique roadshow, attached to a dubious backstory and an exorbitant asking price.

“What’s all this?” Enid wondered, craning her neck for a better look.

There was a bedside table near Castiel’s gurney. Mikey glanced at the angel with a disappointed sigh before setting the tray down. “Tea and crackers,” he replied, gesturing at the bright red box in triumph. “It’s such a shitshow out there. You wouldn’t believe what I had to trade to get these.”

Fighting to keep the nauseated expression off her face, Claire tried to seem grateful. “That’s awesome.”

Mikey’s crooked smile wavered. He picked up the steaming mug. “It’s okay, Claire. Don’t eat if you can’t stomach it. What about tea? It’s, um, chamomile. It’ll help you relax.”

Smiling weakly, Claire reached for the mug. Mikey handed it over, but kept his hands around hers, noticing how badly they were shaking. Her stomach churned at the fragrant scent. She tried it, which turned out to be a huge mistake. Claire choked, gagging violently as her body completely rejected the tiny sip she had taken.

“Shit.” Mikey jumped back, spilling some of the hot beverage in his haste to get away. “Shit. I'm sorry, I'm sorry-" He continued to stammer apologies, watching helplessly as Claire crawled into a ball, unable to control her body’s reaction.

“It’s not your fault,” Enid said kindly, although her voice was trembling. She knelt over Claire, rubbing her back until the tremors eased down. “Shh, easy, easy.”

“M’okay,” Claire mumbled, picking herself up with Enid’s help. She fell back against the wall, sighing heavily, hair plastered to her face. She let out a little moan as Enid wiped her face with the damp cloth, moving her hair out of the way for her. She must’ve realized Claire was too tired to do it herself.

There were people outside, she noticed with a sudden jolt. Arguing pretty heatedly, from the sound of it. Enid must’ve noticed the way Claire shivered, because she quickly reassured her, “Don’t worry, it’s just Carl and his dad.”

“Carl's pissed,” Claire remarked tiredly.

“Yeah.”

“Can't say I blame him. It’s pretty bad out there,” Mikey added, leaning over to peer through the shuttered blinds. “Food’s running low. Dad said the Saviors sacked all the houses. They even burned our beds down! And they keep showing up every week.” He stood back with a sigh, running his hand through his mop of hair. “It’s so fucked up.”

“Carl seems to think so,” Enid said tentatively.

Mikey shrugged. “Doesn’t like his dad rolling over for the Saviors. I mean, who would?”

The front door was slammed shut, likely in Rick’s face. The force of it shook the infirmary’s thin walls. Carl came stomping into the room, shoulders lifted tight in anger. He looked like he had dunked his head under running water, but hadn’t bothered to change his clothes or wash his hair properly. It dripped down to his shirt collar, smelling like wet dust.

Claire looked at her friends. Silently, they all agreed not to say anything about the fresh bandage covering Carl’s eye.

“Chamomile?” Mikey offered tentatively, pointing to the mug on the bedside table.

Caught off guard, Carl’s anger seemed to deflate a little. “I don’t like chamomile.” He all but pouted.

“Is everything okay?” Claire asked.

“No,” Carl sighed, shaking his head so hard it sent his hat askew. “Dad’s going on a supply run. The Saviors will be back soon.” He joined them on the floor, gritting his teeth in anger. “I can’t believe he let it get this bad. This never would’ve happened if I’d been here. *Never* .”

“You don’t know that,” Enid pointed out gently.

“I do,” he insisted, stubbornly.

Mikey picked up the box of crackers from the tray and stuffed a couple of them into his mouth. He sat down with them, bringing the box over. “Yeah, right.” He swallowed noisily. “Say, you haven’t told your dad the truth about Cas, have you?”

Carl scoffed. “Of course not.”

“Good.” Claire gave a small nod. “Keep to the plan.”

“Me neither,” Mikey said. Since they were sitting on the floor, he had to crank his neck up in order to glance up at the unconscious Castiel. “I’m honestly surprised my dad’s not dragging me home as we speak. Only reason he let me stay here is that stupid handcuff." Mikey snorted, adding, "He's gonna be *real* shocked when Cas snaps it right off, huh?”

Enid smiled thinly. “We should keep it a secret anyhow. It's not like anyone’s going to believe us. Not till Cas comes back online.” She sighed, trying her best not to look worried. "Any minute now…"

"I don't like this," Carl admitted, reaching for the box of crackers. "The Saviors are gonna come back and we’re just sitting around waiting for them."

"What do you want us to do?" Enid asked.

"I don’t know. Something? We have to protect ourselves." He stared down at the cracker in his hand like it was his worst enemy. "If we could only get back to the lake. We've left all those guns there-"

Enid was already shaking her head. "Even if we could make it back in time, what about ammo?"

"I know," he huffed in return. "It's just for show. Maybe we could hold them off, in case we have to…" he glanced up at Castiel meaningfully.

Claire lifted her head, turning her unfocused gaze to Carl. "What?"

Carl hesitated, sticking the round cracker into his mouth like he was trying to stall. Finally, he swallowed it down and said, "Negan knew that hunter, didn't he? And he's got Victor. The Saviors are gonna make him talk, sooner or later, and then they'll know about Cas."

A chill that had nothing to do with her fever crawled down Claire's spine. If Castiel ever woke up, he'd go after the Saviors. He was stupid, and impulsive, and with Claire gone, who'd be there to talk sense into him?

Carl reached over to touch her hand. "I'm sorry," he said, regretful, "I shouldn't have brought it up." He tilted his head. "You okay?"

She wasn't okay. Nothing was okay. Breath shuddering, Claire struggled to get the words out. "You'll have to protect him," she insisted. "The Saviors, they have, ugh, they have my angel blade. And that *stupid fucking gun.* You have to… you…"

Another violent coughing fit stole Claire's voice. *It hurt.* She tried to curl into a ball, but Carl kept her upright, holding her by the shoulders.

"It's okay, you're okay…" he soothed while Claire fought just to breathe. "Shit, I'm sorry, Claire. I shouldn't have said anything." His voice began to crack. "Don't worry about anything else right now, okay? Your only job is to hang on."

Shaking like a leaf and gasping, Claire managed a small nod. She flinched when Enid draped a warm blanket over her shoulders, tucking it securely around her. She barely noticed how cold she was.

Claire forced herself to speak. “I want you to know something,” she whispered, her voice a painful croak, “whatever happens, you guys are the best friends I ever had.”

As she spoke, she thought of Jake, and a painful lump rose in her throat. He’d always been such a pain in her ass and she missed him *so damn much*. Would Claire ever see him again? She hoped so. Maybe, if they both somehow ended up in the good place.

“Hey, no,” Enid scolded her gently, even while tears formed in her eyes. She tried to smile. “We’re not saying goodbyes yet. Come on, we talked about this.”

Exhausted, Claire merely burrowed into her blanket, falling silent. She didn’t have it in her to break her friends’ hearts. They still believed Castiel would save her. They thought she didn’t notice how often they looked at him, as if in prayer.

Time seemed to slip by after that. As the sky outside the window turned back, Claire felt herself drifting further and further away. She couldn’t help it. She was warm and cozy under her blanket, and her eyes felt oh so heavy.

*This isn’t so scary,* Claire thought idly, her head lolling back against the wall. Her friends crowded around her, engulfing her in their presence. Their voices washed over her like white noise. She wanted to tell them it didn’t hurt anymore. She thought it would, but the pain had left her body, leaving a pleasant numbness instead.

The darkness called to her, asking her to give in, to close her eyes and rest. Dying felt just like falling asleep.

*I’m coming, Mom and Dad.* Claire felt her mouth move, but no sound escaped her lips. *I have so much to tell you.*

---

Claire woke up to the sound of birds. It was the sweet sound of early morning, a new dawn making way for a brand new day.

It was too bad that Claire had never been much of a morning person. Squeezing her eyes shut to ward off the early morning brightness, Claire let out a low, tired moan. Her neck was caught in a cramp from spending the night slumped in such an uncomfortable position.

"Somebody kill me," she grumbled, voice thick with sleep.

"*...Claire*?"

The voice belonged to Enid. Her friend sounded upset, and so with great reluctance, Claire opened her eyes. Her friends stood over her. They looked terrible, their eyes bloodshot as if they'd spent the whole night crying.

Startled and confused, Claire sat up straight, blinking the sleep from her eyes. "What's going on?" Her mouth felt like it was full of cotton.

"You fell asleep," Carl answered, sounding strange and unsure. He swallowed hard. "We waited."

Enid was holding a knife, but her hand was badly shaking. Claire stared at it, knowing it was important even though her sleep-addled mind didn't quite know *why*.

And then, she remembered.

Claire blinked slowly, the memories coming back to her all at once. Slowly, as if in a dream, she raised a hand to her face. Her skin felt warm. Sleep-warm, rather. Not quite feverish. Her stomach grumbled, reminding her she hadn't eaten in quite a while. Those crackers seemed incredibly appealing, all of a sudden.

She really had to pee.

“What were you going to do with that knife?” Claire asked slowly, realizing her throat didn’t hurt anymore. Her voice sounded normal again. She gave Enid a disapproving frown. “I told you I didn’t want you doing that.”

“Sorry,” Enid whispered.

Claire looked around the room. It was right as she'd left it. Castiel hadn't moved at all, unconscious and unapproachable. He’d really been such terrible company these past few days, hadn’t he? The thought almost made her chuckle.

What the hell was going on?

“Claire,” Mikey said tentatively, watching her with his big doe eyes. “Are you… okay?”

She thought about it. “I could use a shower.”

A short time later, Claire found herself in the infirmary’s upper-floor bathroom. She’d managed the trip up the stairs without assistance, only a little bit dizzy. Assuring the others she was okay on her own, Claire locked herself inside.

It was a nice bathroom, she thought idly. Like something out of a home design magazine. The faucet ran clear as Claire stared at herself in the mirror, poking at her skin and checking her teeth for any sign of the telltale green gunk that poisoned every walker's bite.

It was only her face staring back at her. Her eyes were her own.

A part of her felt a little embarrassed, even. She hadn't died. *She had fallen asleep*.

"I'm going to live," Claire told her mirror self.

Numbly, Claire slipped out of her dirty clothes, leaving them in a heap on the bathroom floor. The shower gave her plenty of time to think. She stayed under the scalding hot spray until her mind cleared. Long enough for her fingertips to prune and for the water pooling at her feet to turn clear, the muck she'd been wearing like a second layer of skin disappearing down the drain.

Knowing she couldn't hide up there forever, Claire finally made her way downstairs, wearing someone else's clothes and toweling her hair dry. She froze when she spotted her friends standing at the bottom of the stairs. They weren’t alone.

"Good morning," Claire said, feeling self-conscious all of a sudden.

"You look well," said Michonne coolly.

Claire flinched, hating the way Michonne was gazing at her with suspicion, the tentative rapport they'd built in such a short time all but gone. And why wouldn't she be suspicious? After all, she'd been expecting a corpse.

"It was only a small bite," Claire offered as an explanation, rubbing her wrist as she stood awkwardly under Michonne's sharp gaze. A part of her desperately wanted to regain the woman's approval. She shouldn't have told her about the bite.

"We think she's immune," Enid blurted, taking a step in between them.

Michonne merely frowned.

"Hey," Carl said, bumping Michonne's shoulder with his own. "We're okay here, I swear. Claire had a really rough night, but we're okay."

Michonne exhaled. She looked at Carl, skeptical but trusting him all the same. Finally, after a moment of silent conversation, she relented. "I'll see you at home," she told him meaningfully. "Don't be long."

Claire watched her leave. Sighing, she sat down on the bottom step. "What are you going to tell her?" she asked Carl.

He shrugged. "I'll figure something out." Smiling wryly, Carl added, "Don't worry. I'm not stupid. I'll stick to the plan." His face softened. "You really are okay, aren't you?"

Absent-mindedly picking at a loose thread in her oversized t-shirt, Claire gave a small nod. "I guess I am." Her eyebrows creased in a frown. "I've got a bit of a headache still, but otherwise? I'm okay."

"How?" Mikey asked. He leaned on the stair rail, peering at her in wonder. "It wasn't Cas, right? 'Cause he's *still* out."

Claire hesitated. "I think it was." She looked down at her hands. Unblemished, no matter how many punches she'd thrown. "I'm different," Claire whispered, almost as if she was admitting it to herself for the first time. Breath hitching, Claire continued, "*He* made me different. I should've realized, I mean, looking back, it's *so* obvious…"

"And that's why you heal so fast," Enid said, with a slow, almost proud smile. She always liked calling her Wolverine.

"Claire, did you die?" Carl whispered, looking pale and uncertain. "Did Cas… did he bring you back too?"

It took a moment for it to click. "You're asking about Judith."

"She's a little different too. Ever since…" He swallowed. "She had this cut on her forehead, from the basement, you know? Except it's completely gone now." He lifted his hand,

displaying the gnarly cuts on his palms, caused by crawling over shards of broken glass. "And it's not just that. She's not sleeping like she used to. Maybe that's normal? I don't know. I don't know what to think."

Mikey snapped his fingers. “The twins knew it too! Remember, when Judith didn’t get sunburned at all? Even though everyone else did?”

"I didn't get a sunburn," Claire whispered. "I never do."

"What happened to you, Claire?" Enid asked gently.

"I didn't die." Claire's eyes began to prickle. "You gotta understand something. Angels aren't *good*. They don't care about you and me. Not really. Cas is different now, but he wasn’t… he wasn’t back then. And he didn’t always look like *that.”* The last part came as an unintentional snarl.

“Like what?” Carl prodded.

Claire's lower lip wobbled. Her voice cracked. “Like my dad.”

A hush fell over the group. Her friends waited, letting Claire tell her story at her own pace.

“My dad left when I was a little kid," Claire said softly, looking at her hands. "Then he came back, and he was off. And something followed him. Demons. They had those black eyes and… " Claire stopped, pushing the memory of her mother's possession away. "They were gonna kill us.” She rubbed her arms, shivering. “I prayed. I prayed *so hard.* I was just a kid. And Cas showed up, he did, but only I could see him. He told me he could save us if he had a vessel. Angels can’t stay on earth without a human host, and I was *it*. He needed *me*. Whatever it is, it’s in my blood."

Claire gave a short, humorless laugh. “An angel inside your head, it’s like…” she looked away, struggling for a way to describe it, “it’s like you’re in six-hundred places all at once

and everything is *on fire*. My dad knew that. It’s where he’d been the whole time. He hated it, and he *still* begged Castiel to take over his body instead.”

No one said anything for several long moments.

"Is your dad still in there?" Enid asked, covering her mouth with her hand.

Claire shook her head sadly. “Not anymore.”

“So what are you?” Mikey asked, watching her curiously. “Are you part angel?”

Her eyes widened. “No! God. I don’t know.” She shivered. “I don’t know what I am.”

"He made you stronger," Carl concluded with a brisk nod. "That's a good thing, Claire. That's a damn good thing."

"Honestly? This kind of explains your Cas complex," Mikey remarked, coming to sit beside her on the bottom step.

"I do *not* have a Cas complex!"

Mikey smiled wistfully. "That's what Jake used to call it."

Claire's eyes narrowed. "That *asshole*." Her expression softened. "We have to get Scott back. God knows what the Saviors are doing to him right now."

"I've seen the Sanctuary," Enid said, hand flying to her throat. "It's massive. There's too many of them."

"Their numbers don't matter. It's not about the Saviors. It's about Negan," Carl said darkly. "We have to kill him."

"We don't even know if he's human," Mikey reminded him.

"Whatever he is, the Saviors are coming back *tomorrow*. I say, we find a way to kill Negan before he gets a chance to learn about Cas. If Victor hadn't told him everything already." Carl bared his teeth in a humorless grin. "Think about it, Claire. Whatever Cas did to you, he made you *immune*. Do you know how valuable that is?"

Claire frowned unhappily. According to the twins, Negan was already immune. Carl was right, though. The Hunters wanted to own an angel, and they had the means to do it. There was no telling what the Saviors would do with that knowledge.

*Why won't you wake up, Cas?* Claire thought desperately. They couldn't even grab Castiel and run. They would be hunted down, just like before.

"Whatever happens," Carl said in a tone that brooked no argument, "We keep Cas safe. My dad doesn't want to fight, but he's gonna have to. I'll make him see that." Face twisted in anger, he added, "As far as I'm concerned, Negan's just a dead man walking."

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys! Sorry it took so long. This chapter came at me HARD. I honestly kind of hate it, but I think sometimes it's best to just move on. I'll probably edit it tomorrow, but for now I'm just glad to be done with it. Yeesh.
We have one more chapter to go before we're in sequel-land.

Love you guys!

# Curtain Falls

Chapter Notes

> Make sure to check out Really Bad Eggs if you haven't already. A small part of this chapter won't make much sense, otherwise.
>
> This chapter marks the end of part one! I feel so blessed to finally put this out there. It's been a long, long time, and an incredible journey for me. A huge thank you to everyone who's left comments and kudos over the years. I couldn't have done it without you.
>
> I'm going to spend some time writing the next part of the story (which I'm so very excited about) along with a few other projects of mine. If you'd like to subscribe to the series, please head over to the series tag and *smash* that subscribe button, lol.

Rick's head hurt in a particular way. It was a pulsing pain that thrummed behind his left temple, accompanied by a growing sense of despair. A familiar sort of agony, brought solely on by arguments with his teenage son.

Said teenager stood planted in the doorway of the small room in the rear of the infirmary, arms crossed over his thin chest. His chin jutted out in defiance, as if daring Rick to try and get past him. Carl made it no secret that Rick wasn't welcome in the infirmary, least of all in the little room in the back where the mysterious "Castiel" lay dying, hanging on by a thread for far longer than Rick had even thought possible.

"Son," he tried again, gazing down at his child and wondering how this bull-headed young man had ever fit in the crook of his arm, "if you'd just *talked* to me-"

"Not this again," Carl said, rolling his eye and letting out an exasperated huff, the very picture of teenage insolence. "Dad, seriously. There's nothing to talk about."

Rick snapped, unable to stop himself, "You haven't told me *a goddamn thing,* Carl."

The boy scoffed and looked away, hiding behind the armor of a defiant teen. Rick sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingertips, cursing at himself for losing his cool.

It had been six days since his children had returned to him: six days trapped in this terrible cold war with Carl and his friends, hovering around the infirmary, keeping a united front against anyone who wasn't them, giving away nothing except half-truths and shrugged shoulders.

Rick had hoped that with enough gentle coaxing, Carl would open up to him. He'd been so patient these past six days when all he really wanted was to grab his son by the shoulders and *shake* until the truth came tumbling out.

Throat tight with emotion, Rick asked softly, "What are you so afraid of?"

It was the wrong thing to say. Carl speared his father with a hard glare. "I'm not *scared*," he answered, flushed with anger. "I'm not *you*, Dad. And why d'you care, anyway? It's not like you were out there looking for us. You let Michonne do that," he said, his tone accusing. "You were too busy licking Negan's boots."

Feeling as though he'd been slapped in the face, Rick drew a sharp breath. He grabbed onto the doorframe, steadying himself. Carl flinched at the sudden movement but held his ground, glaring at his own father like he was an enemy.

The words stung, but it was plain to see the hurt behind the anger. Rick knew his son well, recognized the pain glistening his eye. Slowly, he lowered his hand to Carl's shoulder, feeling the muscle tense under his palm.

"I looked for you," he said softly, heart aching, "of course I looked for you." He swallowed around the lump forming in his throat. "I'll never *stop* looking for you," he added meaningfully. "I know I haven't always been the best father to you and your sister, but Carl, I'm trying to be."

Carl's expression wavered. Then he shrugged Rick's hand off his shoulder. "That was a great speech, Dad," he said, scowling once more, "but I don't *need* your help. I can take care of

myself."

"I know you can," Rick said gently, "but you don't have to do it alone."

"I'm not alone," Carl huffed, crossing his arms.

Rick held back a sigh. Carl was right, of course; he wasn't alone. He had his friends, didn't he? He had returned with Enid and Mikey, his old friends from before they had all vanished. However, at the time, their bond had seemed to be one of convenience, the youths drawn to each other solely because there were no other survivors their own age around. Not so much anymore. Now, they were as thick as thieves. Completely in sync, keeping their secrets to themselves in whispered conversations and furtive glances. Guarding the infirmary and the man whose death was long overdue. Whatever the children were hiding, it was clear this *Castiel* was a big part of it. Or, perhaps, he was the reason for it at all.

And then there was Claire, the girl who'd survived a walker's bite. Or, more likely, the girl who'd lied about it. Rick wasn't quite sure how he felt about her, yet.

Rick's eyes drifted beyond Carl to the stranger on his deathbed, the one his son was so eager to protect. Six days unconscious, *at least*, and clinging to life with each rattling breath. He would've suspected foul play if he hadn't seen Castiel's injuries with his own two eyes, having carried him to the infirmary himself - seen those shoddily stapled wounds on his chest and torso, the unmistakable bite marks on his limbs, the flesh torn clean off his face - there was no faking that.

No doubt, Castiel was one tough bastard. Rick was also sorry the two of them would never really get a chance to meet. He licked his dry lips and asked, "What about him?"

Carl stiffened. "What *about* him?"

Rick knew he had to choose his next words carefully. "Who is he to you?"

“He’s my friend,” Carl added resolutely, squaring his shoulders in a subtle attempt to block more of the doorway from Rick’s view. Showing more concern for the dying man than he’d shown his own father in days.

Rick frowned. He tilted his head, giving Carl a long, thoughtful look. He knew his son, knew that kind of fierce loyalty didn’t come out of thin air. Clearly, Castiel meant something to the children, but there was something disturbing in the way they were showing it. There was no dignity in a slow, overdrawn death. Even dying men had bodily functions, had needs. For all their professed care, they hadn’t so much as placed an IV in Castiel’s arm.

“Don’t worry about Cas, Dad,” Carl said, throwing a glance over his shoulder. “He’s not your problem. You wanna talk so badly? Fine, let’s talk.” He crossed his arms, leaning against the doorframe. “What are you going to do about Negan?”

“It’s complicated,” Rick said, holding back a sigh.

“Make it uncomplicated, then,” said Carl with a scowl. “You know, I kept telling my friends what a *badass* my dad is. I thought… I thought I’d be coming home to a war zone, not whatever the hell *this* is.” He threw up his arms, gesturing at the empty cabinets around the infirmary. “After everything we’ve been through - you let him get away with this? Why?”

“To keep you safe,” Rick said softly. “To keep this community safe.”

“Safe?” Carl bared his teeth in a snarl. “Negan murdered my friend. Glenn, Abraham, Denise, they’re all gone. And what about Daryl? You’re not even *trying* to get him back. And you let them take our guns, our food, our medicine. We’re sleeping on the *fucking* floor.” His voice cracked when he said, “You just gave up, Dad.”

Sorrow wormed its way into Rick’s heart. “They have the numbers, Carl. *An army*. We can’t fight them, not the way you want to.”

“We’re not fighting at all,” Carl said bitterly.

Rick opened his mouth to respond, but the creaking of the infirmary's front door caught his attention. He turned to find Mikey standing by the small kitchen aisle, looking awkward and wearing the expression of someone who had realized too late that they were interrupting something.

The boy fidgeted, shifting his weight from heel to heel. “Hey, um. It’s my turn to watch Cas.” He gave a small, helpless shrug. “Should I come back later?”

“It’s fine,” said Carl, glaring at Rick as he did. “Dad was just leaving anyway.”

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Rick stepped down the infirmary’s porch steps, letting the sun wash over his face with its warmth. The door was slammed behind him, and not by his own hands. He sighed.

The infirmary was situated by the lake, at the very heart of Alexandria. It was a defensible position, which was likely the reason Deanna had chosen the three-bedroom, two-floored Southern-style house as their town’s infirmary. Looking behind him, Rick’s face tightened at the sight of the sealed windows and shuttered blinds. Since their arrival, Carl and his friends had all but turned the infirmary into their den.

Rick sighed, turning the corner. He’d meant to head home (for at least Judith and Michonne would be glad to see him) but paused when he noticed the little boy Carl had brought in. Oliver, he remembered vaguely.

Surprisingly, he was alone, the streets otherwise completely deserted. Normally, the residents of Alexandria would be out and about on such a nice day, tending to their budding gardens or indulging in the latest round of town gossip. Not so much, anymore. The Saviors had trampled over their gardens and, well, they were overdue a visit.

Negan had promised to return in two days. It’d been six days.

No wonder everyone was on edge.

The little boy didn't seem to mind or care, if he even noticed the tension. He was hunched over the asphalt, painting it with bright pieces of chalk. Perhaps he'd followed Mikey over, since he'd been living with the teenager and his father, or perhaps he'd just slipped outside to enjoy the fresh air and sunlight.

Either way, Rick thought, a plan forming in his mind, it was about time the two of them were properly introduced.

"You're Oliver, right? I'm Carl's dad." Rick wore his most benign smile as he approached, without the slightest show of teeth.

"I know who you are," the boy replied, barely looking up from his artwork. His hands and clothes were coated in a fine layer of chalk dust.

Rick crouched down beside him, brow furrowed lightly. "What's this?" he asked, peering down at the single large circle Oliver was painting on the asphalt, alternating between different colors of chalk.

Oliver didn't look up. "It's a halo."

"A halo?"

Oliver hummed in response, selecting a blue piece of chalk from his pile. Rick tilted his head as he watched the boy add another circle to his drawing. The yellows and whites bracketed the other colors in a sort of glow. It wouldn't have been his first guess, but Rick supposed it did look something like a halo.

A memory surfaced in his mind, a scene from a different life. Rick and Lori had received a call from Carl's preschool teacher. She'd wanted to know if there was trouble at home, based

on a drawing Carl had made in class. Something about the size and shape of the windows in Carl's little yellow crayon house. Rick honestly could not recall.

Lori had taken offense to the question, inquiring about the teacher's home life in turn. Over the next few months, on more than one occasion, Rick had caught Lori looking over Carl's drawings, going as far as to pick out crumpled papers from the waste basket in their son's bedroom. He'd never been sure what she was looking for, himself. Sometimes, a window was just a window.

Shifting in his crouched position, Rick lowered his knee to the ground. "How're you getting by, Oliver?"

Oliver shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

"What's the matter?" Rick asked gently, picking on the smallest hint of unhappiness in the boy's body language. He ventured a guess, "Are you worried about your friend?" Rick asked gently.

Another shrug. "Not really."

Rick narrowed his eyes. "No?"

Oliver's small hand turned rough over the asphalt, the chalk threatening to crack in his hand. "It's not like he's *dying.* "

*Oh*, Rick thought, a pit forming in his gut. Somehow, despite his age, Rick hadn't expected the boy to still be this naive about the world and how it was.

"Oliver, look at me, please," Rick said gently, sitting back on his heels. He waited until he had the boy's full attention. "You know what happens when somebody gets bit, don't you?"

“They turn,” said Oliver easily enough, a puzzled expression on his face. His green eyes widened. “Um, do you have *ulterior motives*?”

“I… what?” Rick asked, taken aback.

“Ulterior motives,” Oliver repeated, enunciating each word carefully around his childish lisp, clearly parroting someone else’s words. He fidgeted a little. “It means – um, it means–”

Rick let out a soft sigh. “Did someone tell you I might ask you some questions?” he asked even if he already knew the answer. An idea formed in his mind. “You’re not in trouble, Oliver. You’re right, I do have–” he winced– “ulterior motives.”

*Should’ve asked Michonne to talk to this one*, Rick thought, cursing at his lack of foresight. She was better when it came to kids, including his own.

“I’m trying to get a sense of who you are,” Rick continued carefully. “We don’t let just anybody stay in Alexandria, you know. There’s a process, a way we do things around here.” He fought to keep a straight face as he added, “So I do have to talk to you a little. Make sure you’re not… dangerous.”

Oliver blinked. “I’m six.”

Rick’s mouth twitched. “I don’t make the rules.”

Oliver seemed to mull it over. “Okay,” he said finally, the tension leaving his shoulders. Then he frowned. “Did you talk to Claire, too?”

“I did,” Rick said, leaving out how little he’d gotten out of the girl, what with Carl hovering over his shoulder. “Why do you ask?”

“She’s really dangerous,” Oliver said, proudly.

“Oh?”

Oliver's eyes widened, realizing he might have said something he shouldn't have. "But you won’t kick her out, right?"

“Not without a very good reason,” Rick answered truthfully.

Oliver bit his lip. "You really shouldn't. Cas wouldn't like that," he said as if Castiel was in any position to like or dislike anything.

Rick let out a carefully controlled breath. “Has Cas been around long?”

Oliver frowned. “He’s really old.”

Rick felt a spark of amusement at the thought of Castiel being really old, considering he looked to be around Rick’s own age. “I meant, when did y’all meet?”

“Um…” Oliver hesitated, pausing to think it over. “It’s been…”

The boy looked down at his hands, as if trying to count the… Weeks?... Months?...

All of which must seem like a very long time to a kid.

“A long time,” Oliver concluded, dropping his hands in frustration. “You can ask Cas when he wakes up.”

“Oliver, he’s not-” Rick stopped and sighed.

*Really should've let Michonne handle this one,* he thought somberly.

“What happened to Cas, Oliver?” Rick asked instead, hoping to coax the understanding naturally.

The boy’s brow crinkled. “There was an explosion,” he said, hesitantly.

“An explosion?”

“Yeah. We had to hide.” He said, upturned nose scrunching up in thought. “Then we went to look for Cas, but the monsters found him first. *And they ate him*!” Oliver scratched at his face with a dust-covered hand. “It’s okay, though. He wasn’t awake when it happened.”

“Oliver…”

“Wait,” said Oliver, a brief moment of panic passing over his face. “I forgot!” He threw a guilty look in the direction of the infirmary. “I’m not – I’m not supposed to talk about Cas.”

Rick exhaled slowly. “Why not?”

“Just cause.” Oliver picked up a piece of chalk and pointedly resumed his drawing, mouth set in a determined line.

“You can talk to me,” Rick insisted, not ready to lose that particular thread. “Oliver, look at me. I just want to protect you. I can’t do that if you don’t tell me the truth.”

“Carl says you can’t protect anyone,” Oliver said without a glance in Rick's direction.

Rick closed his eyes for a moment. He opened his mouth to reply but then something caught his eye, a flicker of movement in his peripheral vision. He turned his gaze to the infirmary. A chill ran down Rick's spine as he noticed the open kitchen window. It could've been one of the boys who'd opened it… but something in Rick's gut told him otherwise.

"Stay here," he ordered, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

He covered the short distance soundlessly, instinctively crouching under the many semi-shuttered windows. He pressed his back to the wall, hoping he was only paranoid as his hand lifted the hatchet from its holster at his side. The boys were talking quietly in the backroom, oblivious to the intruder in the infirmary kitchen.

The intruder who was making themselves quite at home, filling a glass of water from the tap. Feeling the glare on his back, the figure looked over his shoulder, as relaxed as one could be.

Jesus smirked and raised his glass in greeting. "Is this a bad time?"

"You could've used the front door," Rick suggested dryly before proceeding to do just that, using the door like a *normal person*. He pulled out a barstool and sat at the kitchen aisle, facing Jesus. He set the hatchet down between them. “What are you doing here, Jesus?" Rick asked. "It’s the middle of the day."

Jesus was a cautious man. He wouldn't have taken a risk, showing up in Alexandria in broad daylight, if it wasn't important.

"Is Maggie okay?" Rick asked, a flicker of dread forming in his gut.

Before Jesus could reply, Carl came storming out of the back room. “Dad, I thought I told you – “ he froze when he noticed Jesus, causing Mikey to bump into his back. “Uh…”

“Hey, kids," Jesus said amiably, a small smile playing on his lips.

Something strange was happening to Carl's face. He looked like he didn't quite know what to do with his mouth. He glanced at Mikey with a pause that was a little too long before replying, deceptively casual: "Hey… Jesus."

Mikey leaned over Carl's shoulder and whispered something in his ear. Carl elbowed him lightly in the ribs in turn.

Jesus raised his eyebrows, bemused at the boys' strange behavior.

*Welcome to the club, friend*, Rick thought, suddenly wishing there was anything stronger than tap water in reach.

Mikey cupped a hand over his mouth and whispered something else to Carl, insistent despite Carl's not-so-subtle attempts to squirm away.

“Stop it,” Carl hissed, a little too loudly to be counted as a whisper, “*No*! I’m not gonna ask… *are you crazy*?“

“Boys,” Rick sighed, feeling the headache returning, “what is it?”

The teenagers exchanged meaningful looks. “Nothing,” came the simultaneous reply after a long beat. Mikey sulked at Carl's side, shoulders slumped.

"Well," Jesus said, glancing between Rick and the two teenagers, his brow furrowed in confusion, “It’s good to see you both returned alive and well.”

“Some of us with brain damage,” Carl muttered, throwing a glare at Mikey. He stepped forward, joining them at the kitchen aisle. “What's going on, Jesus?"

"I came to talk to your dad," Jesus replied, his blued-eyed gaze flickering toward Rick in a silent question.

"Whatever it is, you can say it in front of us." Carl fixed his father with a glare. "Right, Dad?"

Sighing, Rick rubbed at the crease between his brows. "Maggie?" He reminded Jesus.

Jesus' smile broadened, his eyes glinted. “Maggie sends her love.”

He drew a rolled-up map from his satchel, spreading it over the kitchen aisle in a theatrical flourish. The map had seen frequent use, scribbled over many times with marks and dates along with scribbled messages.

It wasn't the first time Rick had seen it, but never in broad daylight, and never with such air of finality over it all. He raised a hand to the map, tracing the notches made by Maggie's neat handwriting. A pit formed in his stomach, an uneven mix of hope and fear swirling about his intestines. Maggie’s love was a death sentence if the Saviors ever caught them with it.

Carl took a step closer. "What is this?"

Rick turned to face his son, lifting a hand to Carl's shoulder. This time, Carl did not brush him off.

"We're not fighting the Saviors," Rick told Carl seriously.

Understanding rounded Carl's eye. "But you're going to." His gaze flicked down to the map. "Or at least, you're preparing for it."

Rick shook his head. “When - *if* - the time comes…”

"Does Michonne know?" Carl asked.

Rick dropped his hand from Carl's shoulder. "She knows enough."

Carl scoffed.

Jesus spoke up. "We didn't know what we were up against last time. Now we do." He pointed out different marks on the map between them. “We know their favorite routes, where their outposts are, where they’ve set up blockades.” He stopped at a crossroad and tapped his finger at the scribbled marks there. “More importantly, we know where they’re losing.”

Rick exhaled sharply. “Explain.”

Jesus smirked. He reached down to his belt and unclipped his radio, setting it on the kitchen aisle. Then he flipped a switch.

The radio came to life in a burst of static, followed by the unmistakable chaos of a gunfight in progress. Someone was screaming, their voice nearly drowned by the cacophony of gun blasts, yelling, and, for whatever reason, classic rock music.

“*It’s a trap*!” the tinny voice yelled over the soundwaves, crackling with more than just panic. “ *Get the fuck –*” a burst of static – “*we’ve got dead ones crawling up our–* ”

Jesus turned the radio off. He hummed. "Someone out there started without us," he said, pleased. "We don't know who they are, but they're doing *something* right." He took a moment to sip from his water glass. "It started with Simon's disappearance." Jesus turned to the kids, adding for their benefit, "He's Negan's second-in-command."

"Negan said he went AWOL," Mikey blurted out, immediately flinching as all eyes turned to him. Still, he continued, "Carl, do you remember? He made that whole stupid speech, right before he… he…”

“I remember,” Carl said softly.

“Is he dead?” Rick asked, eyes narrowed. He remembered Simon, not too fondly.

Jesus shook his head. “Not dead, unfortunately, but he’d been missing. The Saviors picked him up about… five-six days ago? He was attacked, apparently, someone killed most of his men, robbed him, and, uh…” Jesus stopped to scratch his nose, smirking behind his hand - “... gave him a bad haircut?”

Rick stared. “What.”

Jesus held up his hands. “I know, but hear me out. The Saviors went after whoever attacked Simon. Set traps, ambushes, the whole nine yards. It should’ve been an easy fight, after all, it's the Saviors' home territory. Except *they’re still losing* .”

“But *who’s* fighting the Saviors?” Carl demanded. “Who are they?”

The first sign of uncertainty crossed Jesus’ handsome features. “We think it’s an army,” he said.

“An army?” Rick asked skeptically.

“How do you know all this?” Mikey asked quietly.

Jesus patted the radio fondly. “The Saviors are nothing if not chatty.” He smirked, adding, “And we've got someone inside the Saviors' compound. Someone we can trust."

Rick’s eyes narrowed. “Are you sure about that?”

“Maggie is,” Jesus said simply. That, more than anything else he might have said, freed the tension from Rick’s shoulders. “It’s new, what we have. Delicate. Negan’s not stupid enough to trust her, not yet. We’re working on that.”

“Who is *her*?”

Jesus smirked. “Plausible deniability, Rick.”

“Can’t you get her to kill Negan?" Carl asked.

“And then what?” Jesus countered, not unkindly. “Even if she slits Negan's throat and gets away with it, it's not going to be enough. The Saviors are more than one man." He shook his head. “It’ll be a suicide mission.”

Carl bit his lip. “What if you ask her to kill someone else?” He leaned over the aisle. “There’s a guy… he’s British, I think, and he has a prosthetic leg. You can't mistake him for anybody else. He was a prisoner the last time we saw him. Can she do it?... It's important."

Jesus raised an eyebrow. “That’s a pretty tall order. Rick?” He turned to Rick, questioning.

Carl sighed. “Look, Dad, I know I haven’t been completely honest with you,” he said, tense under his father’s gaze. “I’m asking for you to trust me. There are things I can’t tell you yet, I’m sorry about that, I really am, but *please,* Dad. Please trust me.”

Rick studied his son's face. "You're asking to kill a man."

"Yes."

"Is it revenge?" Rick asked, without judgment. He understood the need for it, sometimes.

Carl shook his head. "If he talks, he might –" he stopped and sighed. "It won't be good. I can't tell you why. I can't. Just… please, Dad."

Rick released a long-held breath. A part of him wanted to say no, to demand honesty in exchange for whatever this was. Another part of him wanted to trust his son. Did trust him. Enough to put a stranger's life on the line.

They've done worse, all of them.

Rick gave a small nod.

Jesus' lips thinned, not altogether comfortable in ordering a hit on another man's life. But he nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

Carl sagged in relief. Mikey didn't say a word but looked down at his feet. They both flinched at the sudden crash from the back of the infirmary.

They heard a muffled groan.

Rick picked up his hatchet. He didn't hurry after the teenagers. His son could handle a single walker, he knew that better than anyone.

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The gurney had toppled over. That was the first thing Carl noticed upon entering the room. The second thing was Castiel, sprawled under the gurney's rickety frame.

His heart skipped a beat. Then Castiel looked at him, and he was still Castiel. Face partly torn into ribbons, bloodshot eyes squinted in confusion, shockingly blue and *alive*.

"A little help?" Castiel grunted from under the gurney.

Pushing back a mostly-hysterical laugh, Carl strode forward. He and Mikey lifted the gurney off of Castiel. They helped him sit on the floor, pushing him back to lean against the wall, then tucked his coat and blanket around him. Castiel allowed the manhandling. His hand dangled over his head, still cuffed to the gurney's side rail.

Blood trickled down from the corner of Castiel's eye. He looked terrible. He'd been looking terrible for a while, ever since the walkers had gotten their teeth into him. Somehow, Carl always imagined he'd heal himself when he woke up.

"You're alive," Rick stated. He stood in the doorway, hatchet held loose in his hand.

"I'm very surprised." Castiel's voice was like sanding paper. He pressed a hand to his face, curling forward in his seat. Carl and Mikey caught hold of his arms, holding him upright.

"Easy," Carl murmured, concerned.

Keeping his steps light, Rick stepped inside. His cool gaze swept over Castiel's huddled form in mounting suspicion. Carl glared at his dad. Did he think Castiel was *faking* his injury? A chunk of his face was missing!

"*How* are you still alive?" Rick asked bluntly.

Castiel merely grunted in reply.

"Can we save the interrogation for *later*?" Carl hissed.

“This man needs a doctor,” Rick stated flatly. He had to be shocked to find Castiel awake and unturned, but he hid it well.

“We have a doctor at the Hilltop,” Jesus offered tentatively, stepping around Rick. “If we can bring Dr. Carson here, or you to him – “ he crouched down next to Castiel, peering at him with wide, pale eyes. He must’ve known Castiel was in there, must’ve taken a peek at his unconscious form before. “Were you truly bitten?” Jesus breathed. “Rick’s right – how are you still alive?”

Castiel gave a groan of annoyance, like he wasn't entirely sure why everyone was crowding him right now, but he really wished they'd stop.

“Good genes,” Mikey replied instead, a hint of panic in his voice. He flushed. “Really good genes. He's immune, like Claire. They're, uh, related?”

“Incredible,” Jesus said, looking like he meant it. “Do you know what this means? To the world? I've never heard of *anyone* who – "

“Let’s keep this to ourselves for now,” Carl interjected. “You don’t need to get Dr. Carson, Jesus. Really, it’s fine. We've got this. “

Jesus' brows furrowed, unconvinced. He spoke to Castiel, who had yet to raise his face from his palm, "You need antibiotics, at the very least."

"He's got *really good* genes," Carl insisted, flustered. He gently prodded Castiel with his elbow.

"I don't want antibiotics," Castiel all but growled, dragging his face up. Crusted blood coated his palm. He paused. "Where are we?"

"Alexandria," Carl told him. “We arrived about six days ago. You’ve been, well, you know.” He gestured in his father's direction. “This is my dad, Rick Grimes.”

"And that's Jesus!" Mikey blurted, a little too loudly, making the man in question flinch. Mikey gave Castiel a hopeful look. "You know Jesus, right, Cas? You, uh, met before?"

Jesus frowned. "I don't think so?"

Castiel looked at Jesus, then turned back to Mikey. “Have we?” he asked, befuddled.

Mikey’s shoulders slumped in disappointment.

Castiel seemed perturbed by his reaction. Frowning, he turned his gaze to Jesus, laser-sharp. The two of them stared intensely at one another for several long moments until, abruptly, Jesus *flinched*. He stumbled back in his haste to get away, almost tripping over his own two feet. It was unusual behavior for someone best known for scaling sheer walls.

"Jesus?" Rick asked in concern.

“I’m… I’m going to go,” Jesus said and then all but fled.

“Uh,” Carl said.

With a heavy sigh, Castiel turned to Mikey. "I know him now." His voice still carried a note of confusion. He was acting like he was humoring the teenager, although he seemed confused as to *why*. Trying to be helpful, Castiel added, “His name is Paul.”

Sitting beside Castiel, Mikey slumped against the wall. "I don't think he's coming back with antibiotics," he said dejectedly.

Carl shot him a glare. Then he turned to his staring father. "Cas… has that effect on people," he explained unconvincingly. “Don’t worry about it,” he finished lamely.

Suddenly, Castiel lurched forward. Carl winced as a splash of bloody vomit hit the ground, droplets splattering his and Mikey's jeans. The sound of heavy retching echoed through the small room for several long moments before finally subsiding. Castiel continued making painful hacking sounds, and he would have fallen into his own pile of vomit if Carl hadn't looped an arm around his chest.

With his hand still handcuffed to the gurney's side rail, Castiel's head hung low, gasping for air.

“Where’s the key?” Carl hissed at Mikey.

Mikey blanched. “Shit.” He stood up quickly, patting his pockets. “I don’t know!”

Carl glared. "Go find the girls. And stop being so weird!"

Groaning, Castiel dragged a hand over his bloodied mouth. He only seemed to notice the torn part of his cheek then. Tentatively touching his skin, he only looked annoyed that a part of his face seemed to be missing.

“Yeah, you got gnawed on. Sorry,” Carl said sheepishly. He slapped Castiel’s hand away from his own face. “Stop touching it!” Then he turned to Rick. “Dad, can you get him a glass of water or something?”

"Carl," Rick stressed, incredulous. "He *needs* a doctor."

"He needs a glass of water,” Carl countered stubbornly.

Throwing up his hands in frustration, Rick left the room. Before he could return, Carl heard and flinched at the sound of a sharp metal clink. Castiel's arm slumped at his side, no longer handcuffed to the rail. At least he'd waited until Rick was out of the room, thought Carl.

"Rusty lock," Carl explained upon his father's return, carrying a glass of water and a suspicious stare. He took the water and gently coaxed the glass to Castiel's lips. He had to tilt his head a certain way, or the water would seep out the hole in his face. "There you go."

"Carl –" Rick started to say, only to be shoved rudely by a bunch of teenagers and one very small boy.

Claire pounced on Castiel, hugging him a little too roughly. Enid and Oliver joined in on the hug, leaving Castiel startled and in obvious pain as he held on for dear life.

"You asshole," Claire sniffed into his shoulder.

Grinning a little, Carl slid away from the racket and came to stand beside his father. "Can you… come back later, maybe?" he asked his father hopefully. There was a lot they all needed to talk about, and they couldn't really do it in front of Rick.

They watched as Claire reluctantly pulled away. She raised a fist as if to punch Castiel in the chest. Then she thought better of it, her hand dropping reluctantly at her side.

Rick made no attempt to move.

"Dad," Carl quietly intoned.

Rick did not take his eyes off Castiel. "I don't like this, Carl."

Carl sighed. "Dad, come on."

"Carl – "

"We'll talk later," Carl offered. He adjusted his hat, not meeting Rick's eyes. "Just give them some privacy, okay? I know you have no reason to trust Cas yet, but I swear he's harmless." Carl inwardly winced. That might've been the biggest lie he'd told his dad yet. "I promise I'll explain everything later. Trust *me*, all right?"

Rick heaved a long, heavy sigh. Carl had never been more glad to shut the door in his father's face. He turned around, slumping against the closed door, and waited until he heard the infirmary's front door close.

"What are you gonna tell him?" Claire asked, eyebrows raised. She didn't seem pleased.

"Give me a break, Claire," Carl sighed. "Dad's really hard to lie to."

"Suck it up," said Claire, crossing her arms in a huff. "You can't tell him anything – not until Cas is better. They'll freak out, all right? Cas doesn't need that right now."

Castiel dragged his eyes to meet hers. He had a look like he had no idea what she was even talking about. He nodded, because it was the easiest thing to do just then. Then he winced, because even nodding was difficult.

Claire's frown softened. "Are you okay?"

Castiel blinked at her, eyes bleary. "No."

"Are you going to be okay?" Enid asked before Claire could say anything.

He sighed. "Eventually."

Her answering smile was bright. "Good enough for me."

Castiel dragged a tired hand across his forehead. Then he blinked, and focused on Oliver. The little boy was sitting on Castiel's legs, watching them all with wide eyes. "Have you lost a tooth?" Castiel asked all of a sudden, squinting at the boy.

Oliver's face brightened. He nodded eagerly, then leaned forward to bare his teeth, pulling his lower lip down to display the missing tooth. Castiel peered into his mouth, like that was the most important thing just then.

"Hey congrats, squirt," Enid said, mouth turned in amusement. She leaned forward to ruffle Oliver's hair. "Hope you saved it for the Tooth Fairy."

Castiel froze. "He will do no such thing," he told her sharply. To Oliver he said, very seriously, "Do *not*, under *any* circumstances, leave offerings for the *Tooth Fairy.* "

Eyes wide, Oliver nodded.

The teenagers exchanged startled looks with one another. "There's really a Tooth Fairy?" Enid asked, then cleared her throat because her voice came out as a squeak.

Castiel leaned back against the wall with a sigh. All the energy seemed to have drained out of him. "Where there's belief, there is – " he trailed off, seemingly losing his trail of thought. "We made it to Alexandria?" he asked.

"Yeah, Cas. I told you earlier, remember? " Carl pushed back from the door, concerned. "We finally made it. You've been out for a while."

Castiel's frown deepened. The expression pulled on his facial injury gruesomely. "And what about," he growled, "*those people*?"

“All taken care of,” Claire soothed. “We’re okay, Cas. You don’t need to worry about us. Even Judith’s here, Carl will bring her over later. She’s gonna be so happy to see you.”

Castiel nodded slowly. His brow creased. “And where are – “

Claire interrupted him hurriedly. “They left.”

The atmosphere in the room turned sour immediately. Carl and the others stared at Claire, not that Castiel seemed to notice. He was frowning, blinking in confusion and obvious pain.

“Left?” Castiel asked softly.

Claire nodded, a little too fast. “A few days ago. I’m so sorry, Cas. We couldn’t talk them out of it. You know how Jake gets.” Her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“I don’t understand. Why would they leave?” Castiel asked, starting to move as if he was going to stand up.

Claire pushed him back down. “Easy,” she said. She lifted the blanket and tucked it more securely around his shoulders. “I know how you feel, trust me. But you can’t go after them right now, okay? You need to heal first. You’re in no condition to do anything else right now, okay?”

*So that’s what this about*, Carl thought despairingly. Claire was worried Castiel would go after the Saviors. The others turned to Carl, questioning. They’d follow his lead, he knew. He could tell Castiel the truth, tell him Jake was dead and Scott was taken, and have Claire hate him forever.

Or he could follow *her* lead.

At least until Castiel got better. And then they would go and fight the Saviors.

Together.

Carl pushed a smile to his face. “Just rest, Cas. We'll catch you up on everything later."

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